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The PALIMPSEST

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The PALIMPSEST

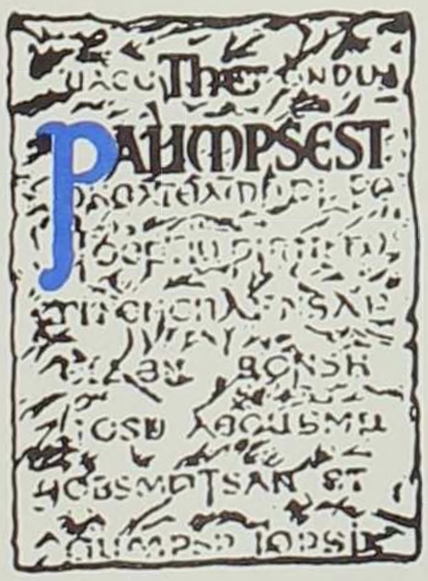
Peter T. Harstad, Director

VOLUME 62 NUMBER 2 MARCH/APRIL 1981

William Silag, Editor

CONTENTS

Cover: *Douglas Street facade of the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City. Designed by architect William Steele, the courthouse is probably the largest Prairie School structure in the United States. The inset photo shows a detail of the sculpture designed by Alfonso Iannelli, one of Steele's collaborators on the project. The Woodbury County Courthouse — inside and out — is the subject of photographer Gerald Mansheim's picture essay, which begins on page 44 of this issue of* The Palimpsest. (SHSI photos)



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

The Interurban Years

by Wayne A. DeJohn

Downtown Clinton in the late '30s. This car had been in use about fifteen years by then. (courtesy Al Wiebers)

By the early 1890s, the electric streetcar or trolley had proven its worth in hundreds of cities across America. In larger cities it was not only serving the busier central areas, but also linking them to suburban areas a considerable distance from the central city. Why not go one step farther, then, and link regional cities together? In one package, intercity passenger service could help one's own city, other cities, and nearby rural areas. Such was the argument for the interurbans — and a convincing one it was, for interurban systems sprang up like mushrooms all over the country in the early 1900s.

In the years from 1900 to 1920, a dozen interurbans began operation in Iowa. One of the earliest was the Iowa & Illinois Railway, which began operating in 1904. It connected Davenport and Clinton by way of Bettendorf, LeClaire, and Princeton. In 1912, a second line was opened between Davenport and Muscatine when the holding company that controlled Davenport's streetcar system purchased Muscatine's system. The two interurbans — the Iowa & Illinois and the Davenport & Muscatine — were consolidated in 1916. The new company was named the Clinton, Davenport & Muscatine, or CD&M. The CD&M operated electric cars between the three cities from that date until 1940.

Electric rail enthusiasts agree that the CD&M was a top-quality line. An engineer familiar with rail systems of the time remembers it as "a very fine electric line, about on a par with regular steam railroads of its day." The track was laid with oak ties and 70-pound rails, skirted by 22-foot poles that carried the overhead wire powering the trolleys. Four electrical substations were required on the 35-mile Clinton to Davenport section to maintain its 620-volt operating current. The Davenport to Muscatine portion was built later and had a 1,200-volt capacity over its 30-mile route. Because of the power difference, the two sections required different equipment and so were operated as separate divisions. Passengers on one division had to transfer in Davenport if they wished to travel on the other. Electricity was also sold to residents and towns along the CD&M route, with as many as 1,550 customers by the 1930s. To them, the CD&M meant more than novel transportation — it also meant rural electrification.

In the early years, the CD&M cars were large, double-entry vehicles manned by a motorman and a conductor. The Clinton division used eight Stephenson cars, the majority of which were fifty-six feet long and carried sixty passengers. The Muscatine division was equipped with new Niles cars in 1912. They were fifty feet long and carried fifty-two passengers. In 1923 and 1924, lighter passenger loads caused the line to switch to smaller cars operated by one man. These cars were unique to the CD&M system since they were constructed locally — in the Rock Island Tri-City Railway shops — from earlier car bodies and parts. They were standard streetcars re-equipped with bigger motors and trucks for interurban use. Seating thirty-seven persons, they contained a coach area in the front, a small toilet and a baggage compartment in the center, and a smoker's area in the rear. A telephone with a long wire could be jacked into receptacles on the poles outside for clarification orders or in emergency situations. The cars' normal running speed was forty-five miles per hour, though they could run faster on an open stretch or downgrade. Some of the line's older and larger cars were, with some rebuilding, pressed into service as freight carriers. They amplified a sizable contingent of utility or special-purpose vehicles kept busy on the Clinton-Davenport tracks: two freight locomotives, two dumping cars, and a motorized crane. A sweeper did the routine work of cleaning the tracks.

Commuters board the interurban for the journey to work. This photograph pictures an unidentified interurban of post-World War II vintage. (SHSI)

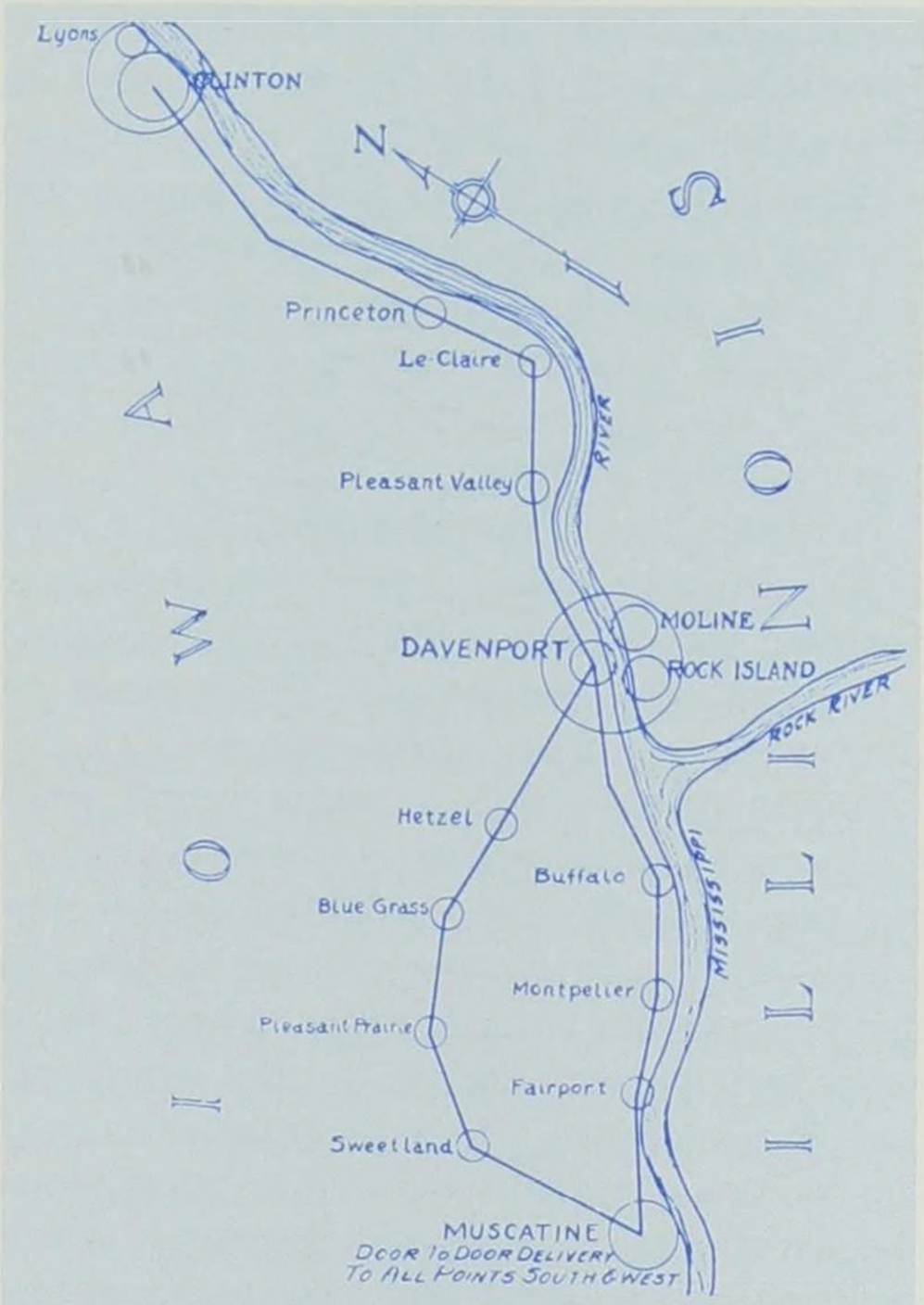
Scheduling was generous on the CD&M. At its peak during the World War I years, the line provided fifteen runs daily between Clinton and Davenport. Passengers leaving Clinton could depart as early as 5:10 AM and as late as 11:30 PM. Twelve runs, between roughly the same hours, were made from Davenport to Muscatine. In the early years, it took two and a quarter hours to complete either trip, but in the 1920s and the early 1930s this was reduced to an average of seventy-five minutes for the Davenport-Clinton run and seventy-five to eighty minutes for the Davenport-Muscatine trip. In the 1930s, schedules were reduced, but a rider could still leave Clinton at 6:35 AM and arrive in Davenport by 7:50 AM — just in time for commuters to be at 8:00 AM jobs in downtown Davenport. This car then returned to Clinton, and the round-trip circuits repeated until late in the evening. The last trip from Davenport to Muscatine was at 11:30 PM in the earlier years, and 8:05 PM in the 1930s. Additional commuter trains ran between Pleasant Valley and Davenport in the peak morning and evening hours. Also, a special trip was made each weekday from Blue Grass to Davenport at 8:01 AM and back again at 4:00 PM. Express trains, stopping only at the larger towns, operated for a number of years on the Clinton-Davenport run. These were discontinued as passenger ridership declined.

Fares were reasonable, about two and a half cents per mile. Regular riders could take advantage of ticket books, which reduced the charge to about one and a half cents per mile. In the 1930s, the standard fare for the trip from Davenport to Muscatine was $.60, or $1.10 round trip; the Davenport to Clinton fare was $.80, or $1.45 round trip. Many of the riders, originating from points closer to the cities, paid much smaller fares — usually 25 cents or less.

Transfers could be obtained for the trolley systems in the three cities served.

The Clinton to Davenport route closely followed the Mississippi River. Depots and agents were located at Pleasant Valley, LeClaire, and Princeton, but there were forty stops listed in the CD&M schedule. From Clinton to LeClaire, the passengers enjoyed the scenic view of wooded areas, where sharp cuts in the landscape, quarries, good fishing streams, and glimpses of the nearby river were steady fare. Between LeClaire and Bettendorf the terrain opened up. The land was green and prosperous, a river plain with neatly kept onion fields around Pleasant Valley. In the greenhouses of the Davis Gardens, flowers and vegetables grew in the middle of the winter. Sumptuous homes on the bluffs above, including one which was later converted into a country club, indicated the presence of affluent city people seeking the good country life. In Bettendorf, the mammoth factories of the Bettendorf brothers signaled the approach of the big industry and larger population of the Tri-Cities. Passing the busy switching area at East Davenport, the cars entered Davenport street rails and mingled with automobile and pedestrian traffic on downtown streets. The cars pulled up to the depot on Perry Street, which was conveniently located for business, shopping, recreation, and other downtown activities.

Travel on the Muscatine division was on a different set of cars, normally with different motormen. Leaving the Perry Street depot, cars went west on Telegraph Road, past the attractive farms and market gardens west of Davenport. The first major stop was at Blue Grass, the center of a prosperous farming district and a town of several hundred people. The CD&M track roughly paralleled the Rock Island trunk line tracks until this point, but when it entered Muscatine County, it veered southwestward to within about four or five miles of the Mississippi River before



CD&M operations extended seventy miles. The Buffalo-Montpelier-Fairport connection was not a rail line but an express service route. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

Note on Sources

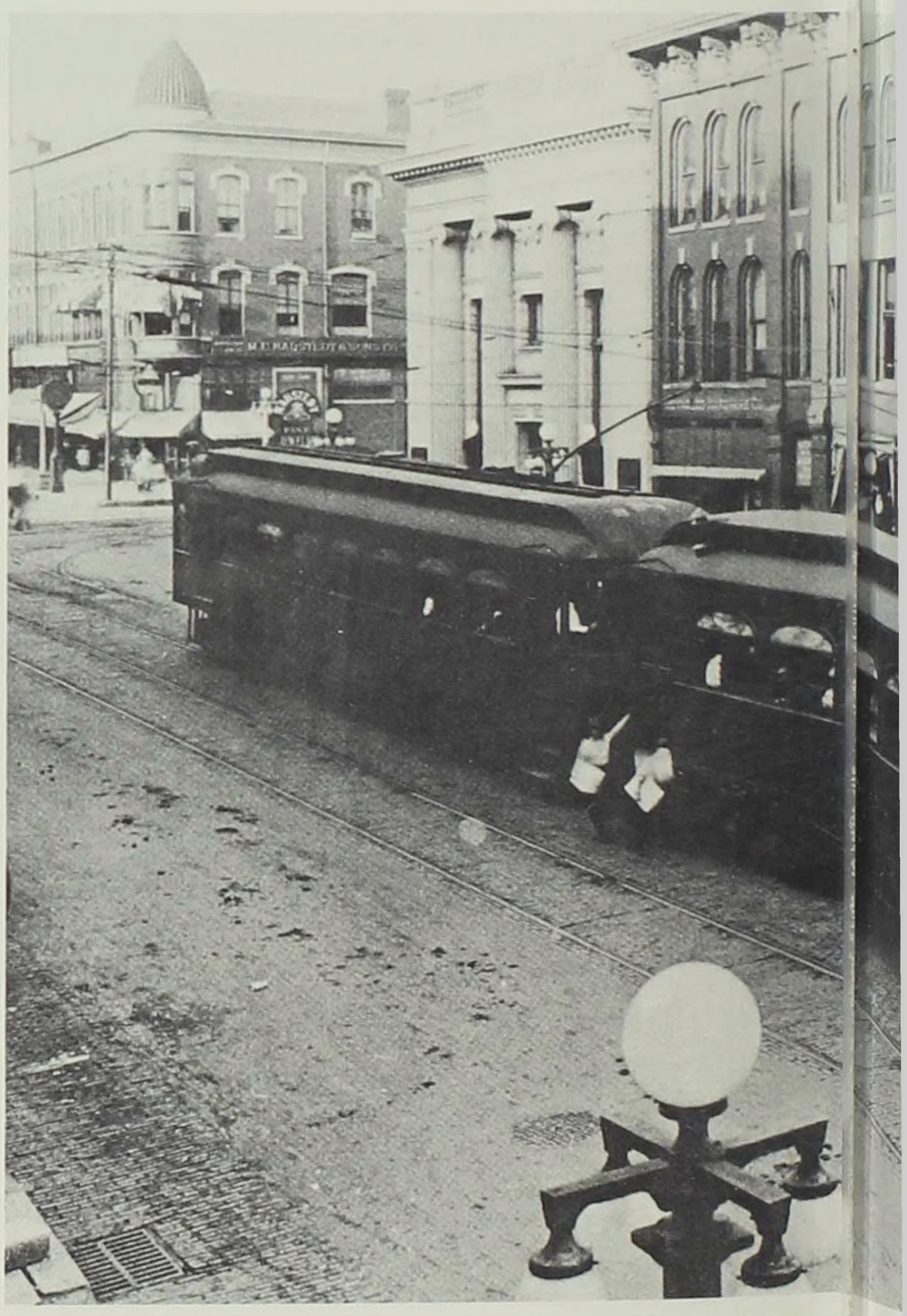
Important sources on the CD&M can be found at the Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company in Davenport. The company's central files contain in-house transportation reports, newspaper clippings, photo albums, and other material. The assistance of company archivist John Killion was invaluable. Interviews with Max Roller and with former CD&M motormen Al Wiebers, Clyde (Ike) Nelson, and Tom Kilpatrick provided important information.

For the technical dimension of the history of the interurbans, see the bulletins of the Central Electric Railfans Association, especially John F. Humiston, "Clinton, Davenport, and Muscatine Railway Company," Bulletin #36, C.E.R.A. (Chicago, 1942), and Norman Carlson, ed., "Iowa Trolleys," Bulletin #114, C.E.R.A. (Chicago, 1975).

Other secondary sources included *Quad-City Times* articles by Jim Arpy and Rema Graham, and an article titled "Davenport's Own Railway," published in the *Davenport Chamber of Commerce News*, April 1934.

curving back toward Pleasant Prairie and Sweetland. Most of the dozen or so stops in Muscatine County were farm or road intersections indicating lighter traffic than on the Clinton division. The latter was busier, both in freight and in passenger volume, but in the first ten to fifteen years of operation both parts of the line frequently enjoyed full cars and plenty of business.

Neither Clinton nor Muscatine had a true depot. In both cities, downtown businesses assumed the CD&M operations as a sideline, and passengers boarded cars in the street as they would a normal trolley. In some of the towns there were depots, ticket agents, and even small waiting rooms. At some of the lesser stops, small sheds provided shelter for waiting riders. Rural riders, however, usually had to signal the train in order to board. The procedure recommended by the company was to extend one's arm horizontally above the tracks and wait for the motorman to blow the whistle twice in acknowledgment. After nightfall this was not effective, and waiting riders were then urged to "light a match or a piece of paper and wave it until the motorman answers the signal."



Downtown Davenport: the car on the left pu[lls] depot is on the other side of the cars. (courtes[y] [Iowa-Il]

Accidents on the CD&M were rare compared to interurbans in other places. Not one of the ex-motormen interviewed for this article can remember an accident fatal to riders. The cars occasionally struck automobiles and livestock along the route, but the resounding and deadly crashes and derailments that occurred on some lines never stained the CD&M record. This was due in part to the quality of the CD&M trackbed and equipment, but it was also due to the care and concern of CD&M personnel. One motorman, Al Wiebers of Camanche, recalls clutching the controls with his orders in his palm for fear of forgetting them.

The motormen had to be hard-working and versatile, for their job required much more than controlling the speed of the car. After 1923 or 1924, they had to be both motormen and conductors — operating the car, collecting fares, and handling baggage or loading freight. And, of course, if rowdies caused trouble on the cars, the motormen had to be bouncers too. One evening, when a gang of Clinton-bound toughs started a brawl in the rear of one of the cars, they were forcibly ejected at LeClaire by a determined motorman and a lineman wielding a large monkey wrench. On one-man cars, the motorman had to handle most situations by

one on the right for a peak load run. The
a-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

himself. Equipment problems, such as a malfunctioning trolley, were dreaded occurrences. Summer heat would cause the overhead copper wire to expand and sag, creating the danger of the trolley pole jumping the line. There were cases of loose trolley poles knocking out brackets, and even careening wildly and smashing through car windows. In winter, ice and sleet on the wire could cause the cars to lose power or crack the trolley wheels. In either season, the motorman then had to clamber atop the car to fix, reposition, or replace the trolley assembly. At night or in severe weather, this was an arduous task.

Most work, though, was more mundane. On freight runs, the time-consuming switching of cars was a major job. At times, the CD&M men also had to assume the laborious task of loading and unloading the freight cars. Even baggage on the passenger cars frequently involved heavy work — since passengers were allowed 150 pounds of baggage. The CD&M also carried mail and commercial shipments, so packages often filled the baggage area and overflowed into nearby seats and aisles. Smokers heading for the rear of the car sometimes found the way impassable. For the motormen, the various duties sometimes stretched into fourteen or fifteen-hour days, for a top hourly wage of 65 cents in the 1930s. No holiday or overtime rates were paid. Nevertheless, motormen liked the varied work and the congeniality of passenger service.

The passengers themselves were a diverse lot. Since outlying secondary schools were nonexistent then, many rural youths rode each weekday to attend high school in one of the three Iowa cities. The special commuter run from Blue Grass to Davenport carried students who attended Davenport High School. People working in downtown businesses and offices — store clerks, businessmen, and professionals, for example — were regular commuters on the CD&M. They often filled the cars to standing room capacity during the morning and evening rush hours. Travelling salesmen typically did just the reverse, riding out of the cities in the morning and returning in the evening. In the early days, before the full emergence of the automobile, the interurban was a vital link between these salesmen and the smaller communities in townships along the Mississippi. Workers were not a large category of CD&M riders since most of them were served by city trolleys, but a few rode the morning trains

A CD&M freight train arrives in Davenport in the 1930s. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

from Davenport to the factories and fields of the Bettendorf and Pleasant Valley area. During the slack hours, many women from small towns and farms rode to the cities to shop.

Farmers also found the system convenient for bringing eggs or small-lot produce to a nearby town for marketing. Their cans of cream were tagged and left at CD&M stops, whisked into the car's baggage compartment, and delivered to the creamery in Davenport. One elderly farmer from northern Scott County relied on the CD&M in a special way. A regular weekend tippler at Davenport nightspots, he sometimes drank too much and needed to be dutifully assisted off the last evening run by accommodating CD&M motormen.

Regular riders became accustomed to sitting in a particular seat on the cars and became acquainted with one another and the motormen too, so the atmosphere was friendly. "Everybody knew my name," recalls a former motorman who often piloted the Blue Grass to Davenport commuter runs, "and we motormen knew the riders."

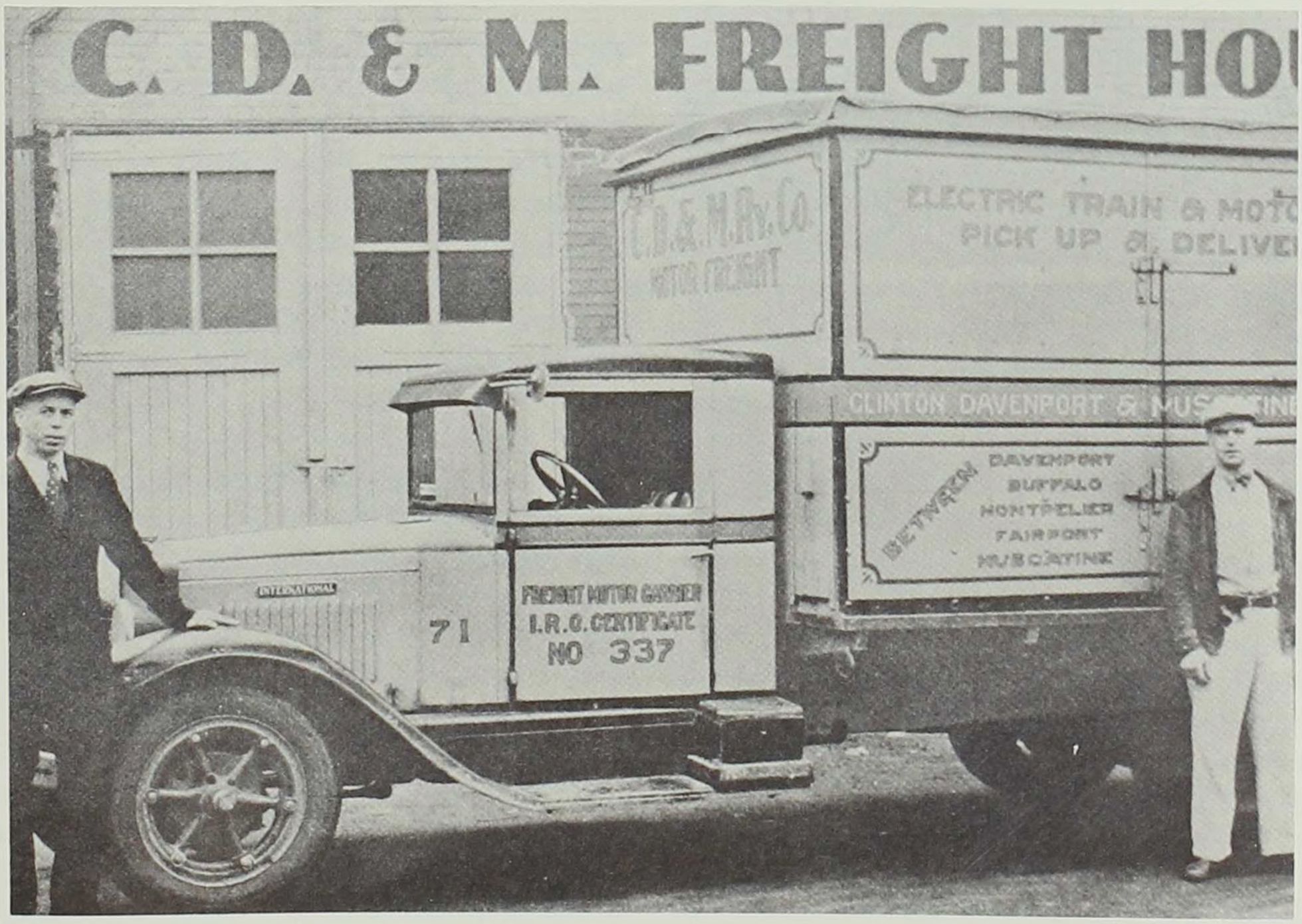
Recreation provided another source of ridership. People from the rural areas were attracted to recreation spots in the Tri-Cities, which were served by trolley connections to the interurbans. Like many interurbans seeking to increase their traffic, the CD&M for some years maintained its own park. Opened in 1906, it was just north of LeClaire. Dances were held and steamboats landed there, adding to the number of picnickers and excursionists. The Oakes Park stop, near Camanche, was another pretty wooded site that was the scene of many recreational gatherings. Especially on the Clinton to LeClaire stretch, there were good fishing and camping places, which the CD&M pointed to in its promotional literature. Fishermen from Clinton and Camanche rode to their favorite haunts downstream in the Wapsie River bottoms or along Rock Creek.

We think of the interurbans as passenger lines, but many of them carried substantial amounts of freight as well. The CD&M was one of these. In fact, its freight service was more important and more profitable than its passenger service by the 1920s. The carrying of express items, mail, daily

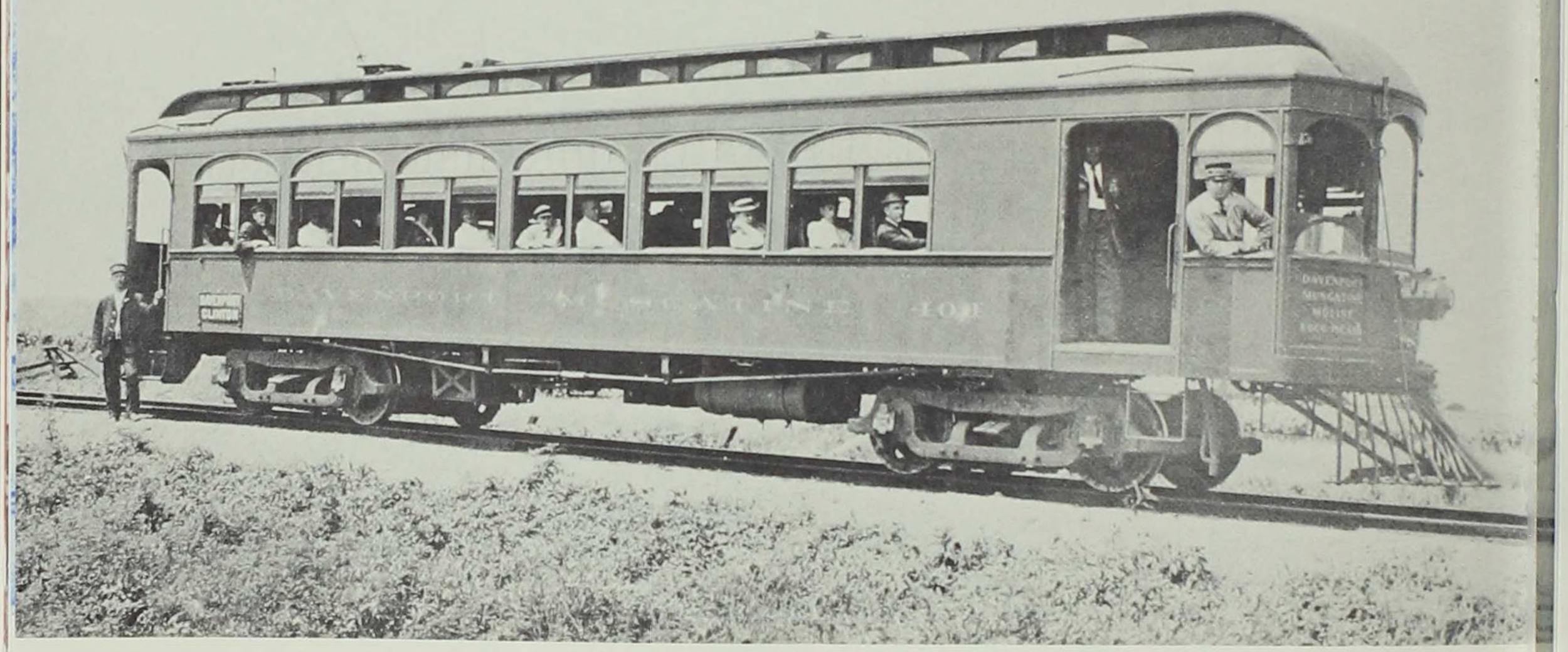
newspapers, and the like on its passenger cars constituted only a small portion of this side of the business.

Carload freight was handled by husky steeplecab locomotives and refitted express cars, and the trains they pulled looked like any freight train. In the 1930s, two scheduled freight trains ran on the system and carried about 500,000 tons of freight a year. Many carloads were transferred between the Chicago & Northwestern line at Clinton and the Rock Island line at Davenport, the CD&M linking the two larger lines. Other cars had a local origin or destination. Perishable goods leaving Davenport at 1:30 PM could be unloaded in Clinton and *enroute* to grocery stores and restaurants by 3:30. Bread baked in Davenport arrived in Clinton on the last interurban in the evening, ready for early morning distribution. Stone, sand, and gravel were carried from LeClaire, Princeton, and Camanche areas; coal was brought to the Riverside power plant near Pleasant Valley and to the Davis Gardens outside Bettendorf. The Davis Gardens also received carloads of manure for its planting beds. Onions and livestock were shipped from the same area. Special CD&M cars and crews worked around the clock when the Pleasant Valley onion crop was ready to ship each summer. Twenty carloads at a time were often dispatched, sometimes totalling 250 carloads a season. The CD&M carried them to larger lines, which took them to Chicago and points farther east.

In the 1920s, the CD&M began to pur-



Part of the CD&M's expanding truck fleet in the 1930s. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)



An early Niles two-man car carries a full load on the Muscatine division. (courtesy Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

chase its own motor trucks and initiated express service. It advertised free pickup and delivery of goods anywhere in the Tri-Cities. A separate freight depot at 101 Brady Street in Davenport was the hub of this expanding business. Soon the trucking line was operating in areas remote from the CD&M tracks, making regular express runs to Buffalo, Montpelier, and other places. "Local express service at freight rates" was the company's claim in 1936. The motor truck, although a growing competitor for CD&M rail business, was used by the company to parallel and supplement its own rail operations.

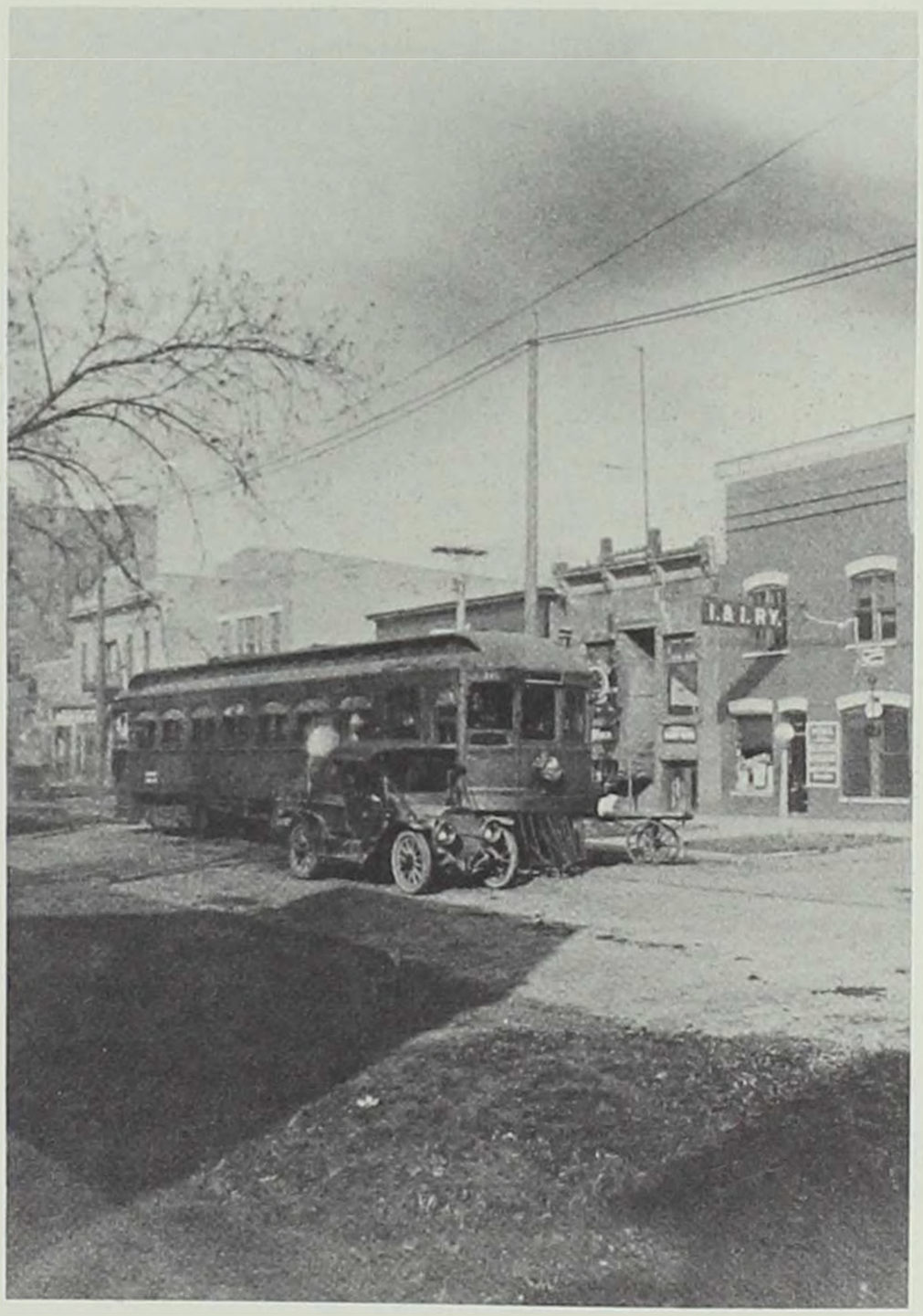
The CD&M and its predecessors served eastern Iowa for over thirty-six years, from 1904 to 1940. During the latter half of that period, the company suffered growing competition from the automobile and the truck. As noted above, declining ridership dictated the transition to lighter cars and less frequent scheduling in the mid-1920s. To the evident virtues of motor transportation — its flexibility and the fact that it did not require large private investment in equipment or rights-of-way — one must add the psychological aspects of an America that was quickly adopting the values of consumerism and privatism. The assumption that progress entailed constant technological or material change and that "new is better" were becoming dogma. To many people, the electric streetcar began to appear outdated and cumbersome, even boring, in comparison to the lively and novel auto.

In the 1920s, the breakthrough to "automobility," to use one historian's apt term, was beginning to cast a shadow over street rail and interurban alike. The CD&M foresaw the direction of change and began to supplement its rail service with buses. In 1928, shortly after the completion of the paved highway between Davenport and Clinton, it introduced buses on its schedules between the two cities. In 1929, buses appeared on the Davenport to Muscatine trip. The company also tried to interest the public in the novelty and comfort of a new set of "parlor coaches" purchased in the early 1930s, but by 1930 over a third of its passen-

gers travelled by bus (59,874 of the total 157,902 riders). The six daily trips from Davenport to Clinton were now supplemented by three bus trips each way on the highway. Rail ridership slipped. The packed cars so common to the early 1920s grew more and more infrequent. The company began to rely on its freight service as income from passenger service declined. The CD&M's argument that riding the interurban was safer and cost a third to half of what it cost to drive an automobile the same distance did not persuade commuters who were becoming irretrievably hooked on the auto.

By the mid-1930s, the switch from trolleys to motor buses within the Tri-Cities had gone even further than on the interurban. In 1936, buses replaced almost all of the Davenport and Tri-City trolleys. A nationwide campaign to scrap streetcars — spearheaded by General Motors and other auto-related industries — claimed success after success, and decisions by CD&M officials indicated that the trolley's end was near. The perennially weaker Davenport-Muscatine portion of the system discontinued electric rail service in 1938, and in 1940 Clinton-Davenport service ceased. A few of the cars and utility vehicles were sold to other rail systems, where they remained in use for a few more years. Most, however, went to a local dealer who resold them as diners, homes, and scrap metal. The track, except for a 13-mile section between East Davenport and LeClaire, was dismantled and scrapped. Eventually, the People's Power and Light Company — a sibling company and predecessor of the present Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company — took over CD&M's electrical service to rural areas.

Thus, despite its efficiency, its safety, its dependability in all kinds of weather, and its excellent service to eastern Iowa, the CD&M passed into history in the space of little more than one generation. The opportunity for a balanced transportation system, capable of moving large numbers of people safely and cheaply, passed with it. Only recently, with the advent of our current energy crisis, have we in Iowa — and in the United States — begun to appreciate the significance of the interurban's decline. It would appear that the costs involved in shifting to a unidimensional, heavily energy-consuming mode of transportation have yet to be fully reckoned. □



An I&I car at the Clinton depot, before the depot relocated and began operating out of a downtown business. In time, smaller cars replaced the full-sized car pictured here. Already the railroad and the automobile jockey for position. (courtesy Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

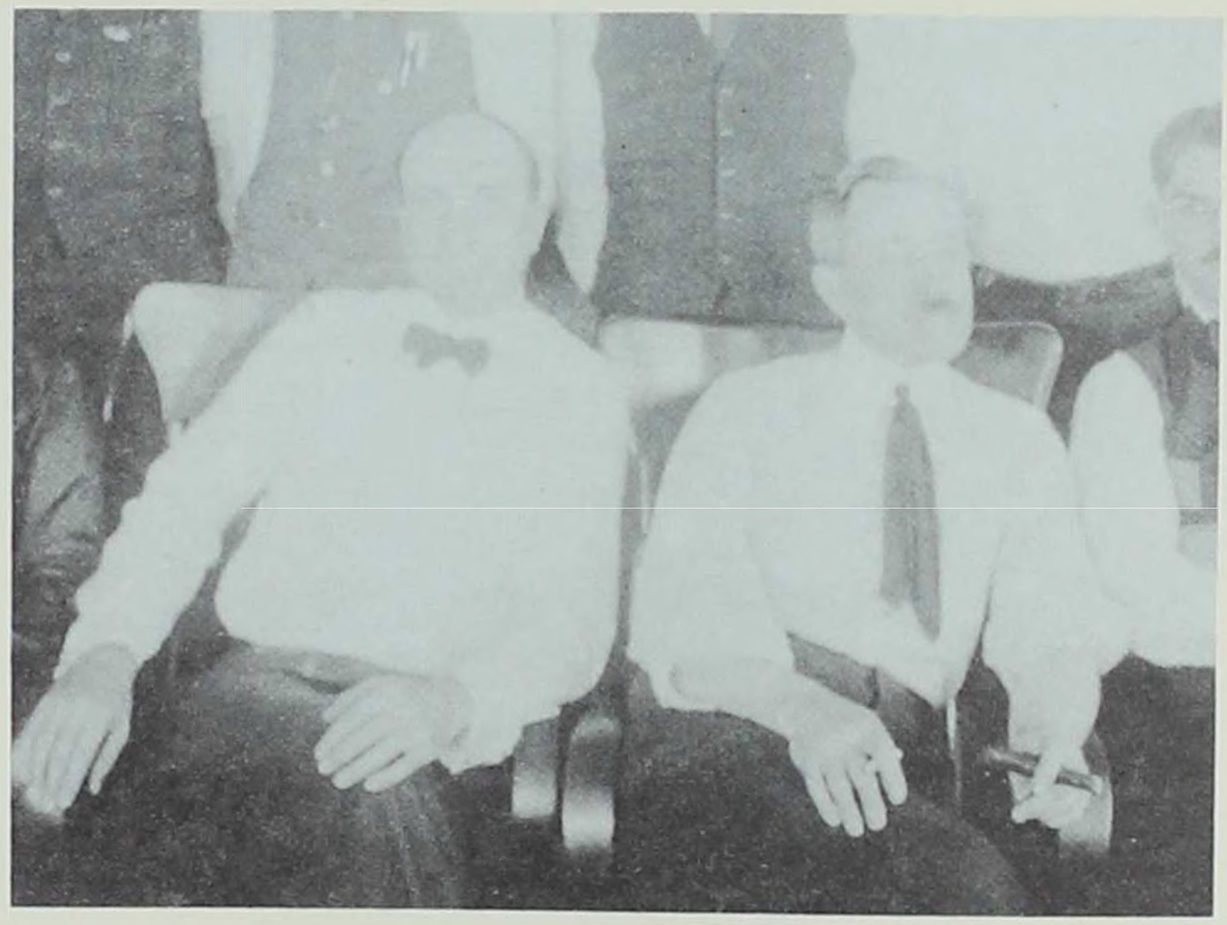
William Steele's Silent Music

Photographs by Gerald Mansheim

In 1906, William Steele brought the architectural innovations of the Prairie School from the Chicago office of originator Louis Sullivan to the bustling streets of Sioux City. A decade later — after building up a successful Sioux City business with conventional designs — Steele paid homage to his mentor with the magnificent Woodbury County Courthouse, the largest structure built along Prairie School lines in the United States. Today, sixty years after its completion, the Steele courthouse remains a brilliant reminder of the richness of the Sullivan tradition.

William La Barthe Steele was born in Springfield, Illinois in 1875, attended school there, and then studied architecture at the University of Illinois. Upon graduating in 1896, Steele joined Louis Sullivan's staff as a draftsman. There he met George Grant Elmslie, another Sullivan assistant who in 1893 had succeeded Frank Lloyd Wright as the master's chief designer. Like Wright, Elmslie and Steele practiced Sullivan's new architecture, combining modern construction techniques with a naturalistic aesthetic. In his superb designs for St. Louis's Wainwright Building (1893-94), Chicago's Stock Exchange Building (1893-94), and Buffalo's Guaranty Building (1894-95), Sullivan had pioneered a style that offered a dignified alternative to mimicking the classical style in the design of public buildings.

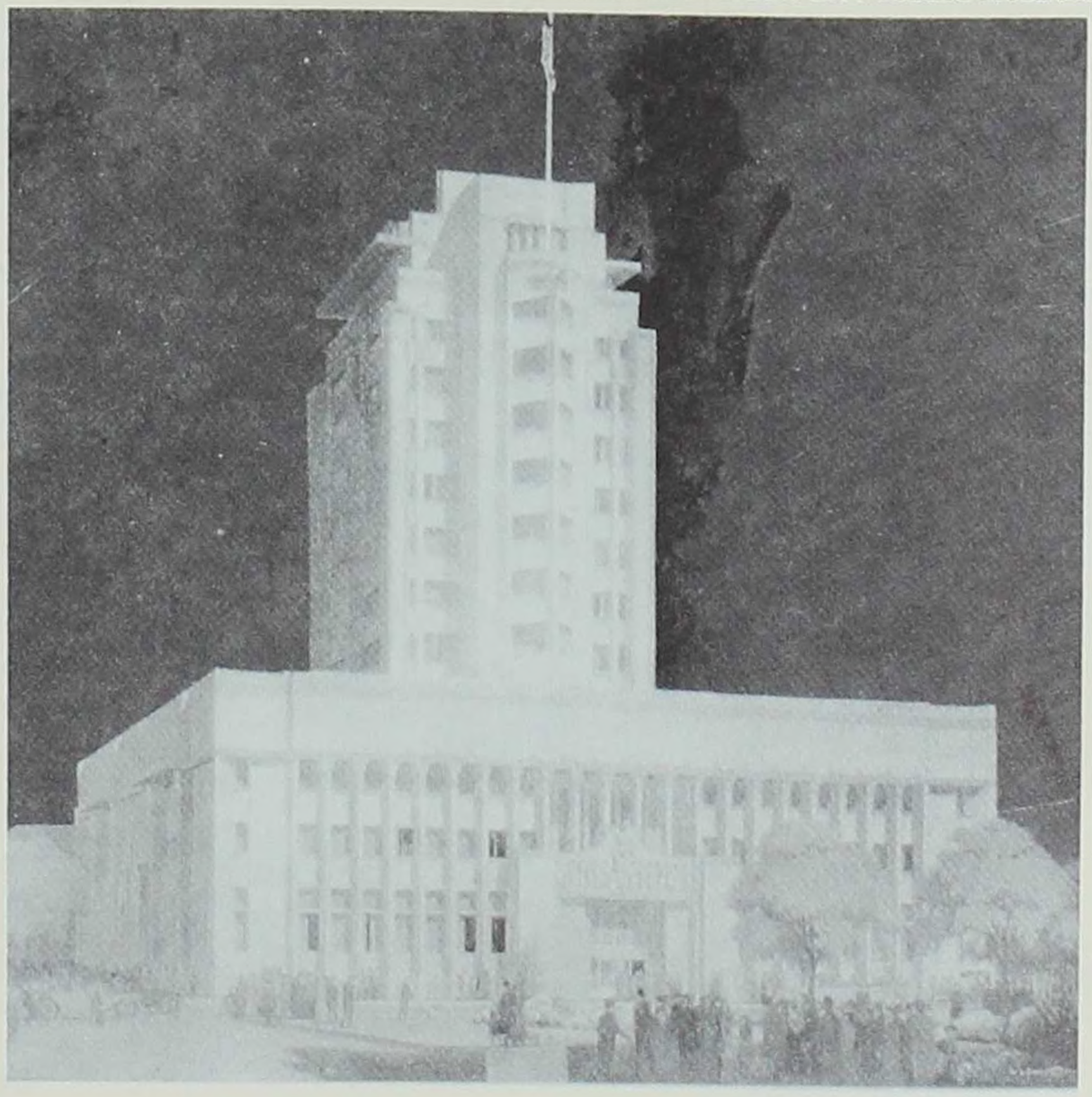
William Steele worked in Sullivan's office for three years. In 1899

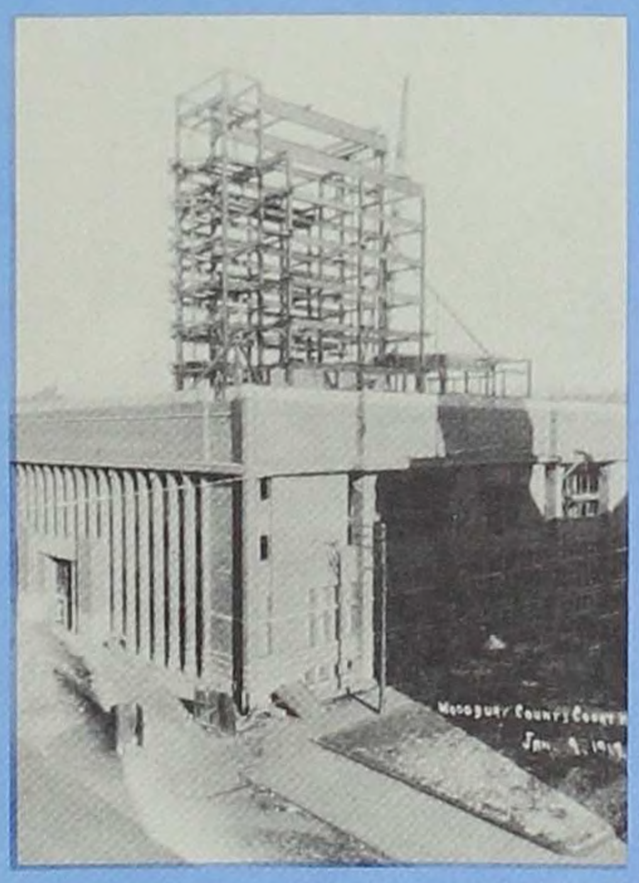


COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

Architects William Steele (left) and George Elmslie (right) collaborated on the design for the Woodbury County Courthouse. Both had worked in Louis Sullivan's Chicago office. Their drawing of the proposed courthouse — dated March 1915 — appears below. On the opposite page: the Douglas Street entrance in 1981.

COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM





COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

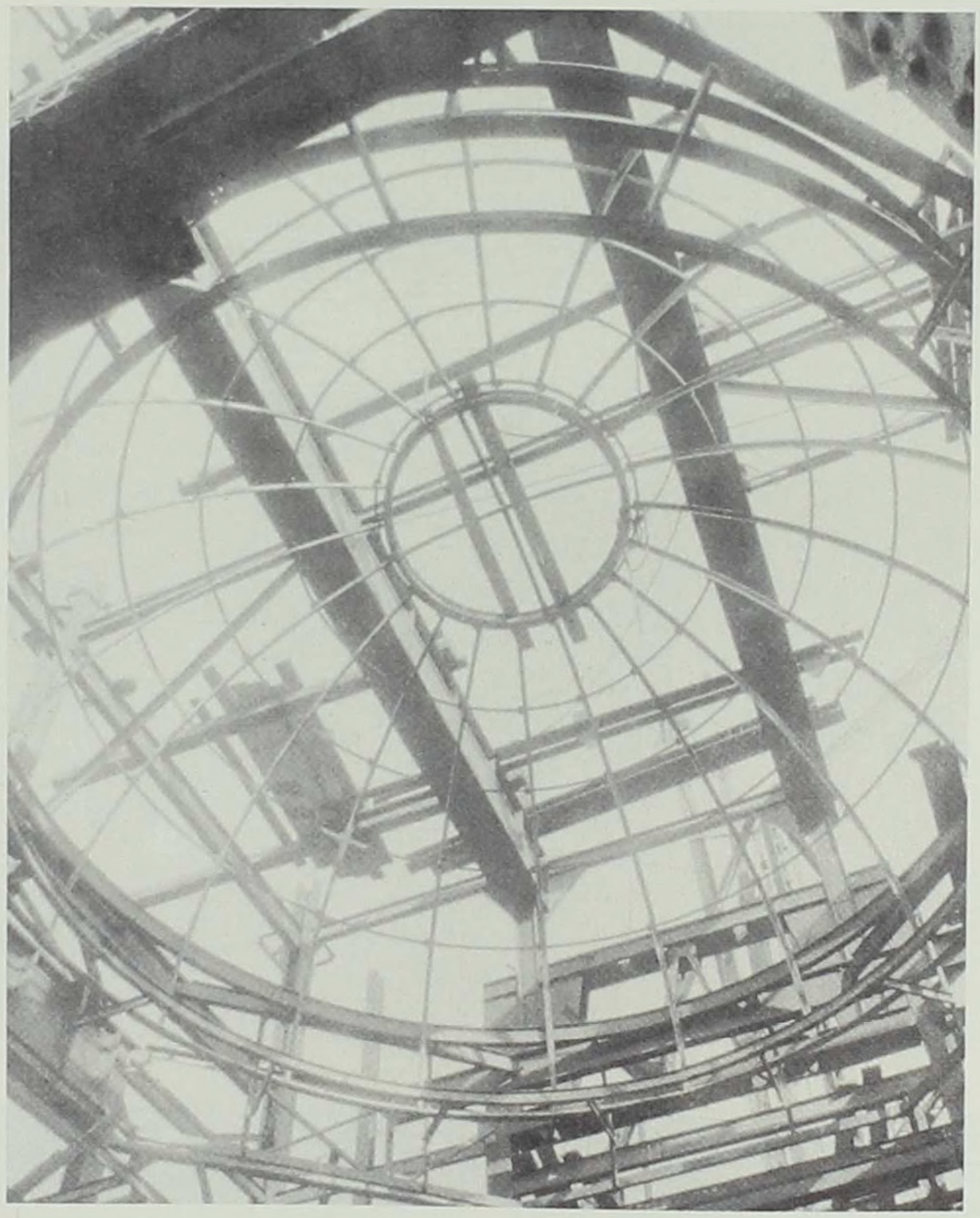
The architect's drawing of the Douglas Street facade — and photographs of the courthouse under construction in the winter of 1916-1917, found in Steele's notebook and now in the collection of the Sioux City Public Museum.

he moved to Pittsburgh, where he worked for a number of local architects, but later returned to the Midwest and opened an office in Sioux City. Steele found plenty of work in the Missouri River metropolis (the farm prosperity of the early 1900s sparked a building boom), but it was not until 1915 that his ties to the Prairie School became obvious in his Sioux City work.

In June 1914, the Woodbury County Board of Supervisors won voter approval to spend $500,000 to build a new courthouse large enough to handle the public business of the county's burgeoning population. The supervisors' aim was not merely utilitarian, however, for they hoped to build a courthouse that would best — or at least match — the courthouses of county seats in northwestern Iowa and throughout the state. Such boosterism was characteristic of nineteenth-century Sioux City — the site of several corn palaces, an elevated railway, and a combination bridge — so it is hardly surprising that the supervisors limited entry of architectural proposals to designers whose work they respected, including the forty-year-old William Steele.

Steele won the competition with a Gothic Revival design, but as soon as he was awarded the commission — on January 5, 1915 — he asked the supervisors' permission to draw up an alternative plan for the proposed courthouse. When they agreed, Steele called in his friends George Elmslie and William Gray Purcell from Minneapolis; together the three men drafted a new proposal. On March 23, 1915, Steele presented

continued page 51



COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

Above, the dome under construction; below, castings of exterior ornament — including bison heads ("a gentle tribute to the earlier days") placed on the building's east side, and one of several floral patterns that appear throughout the structure.

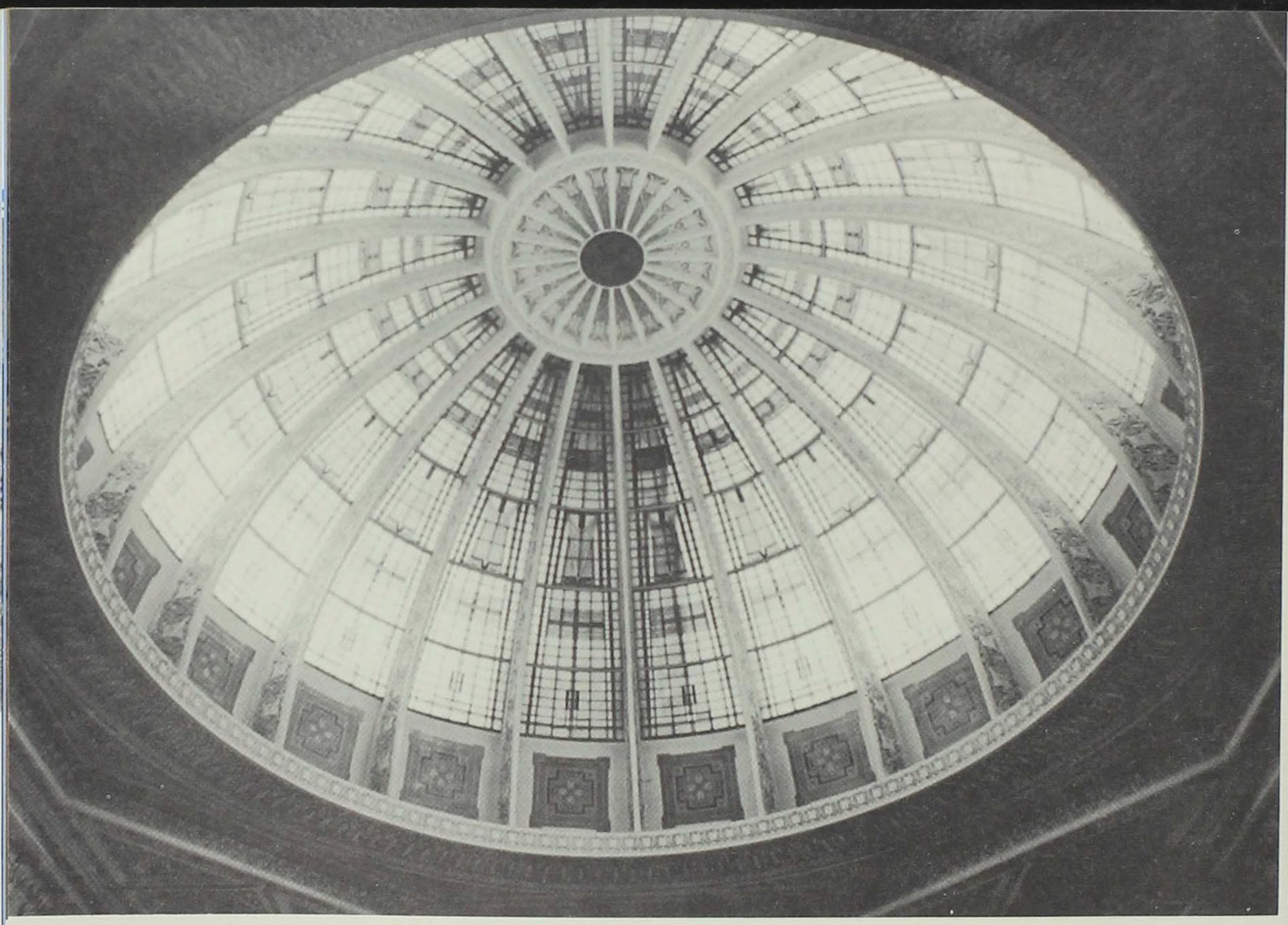
COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

On the building's second floor are several courtrooms, including this one for the Equity Court. Richly colored painting graces the wall above the judge's bench.

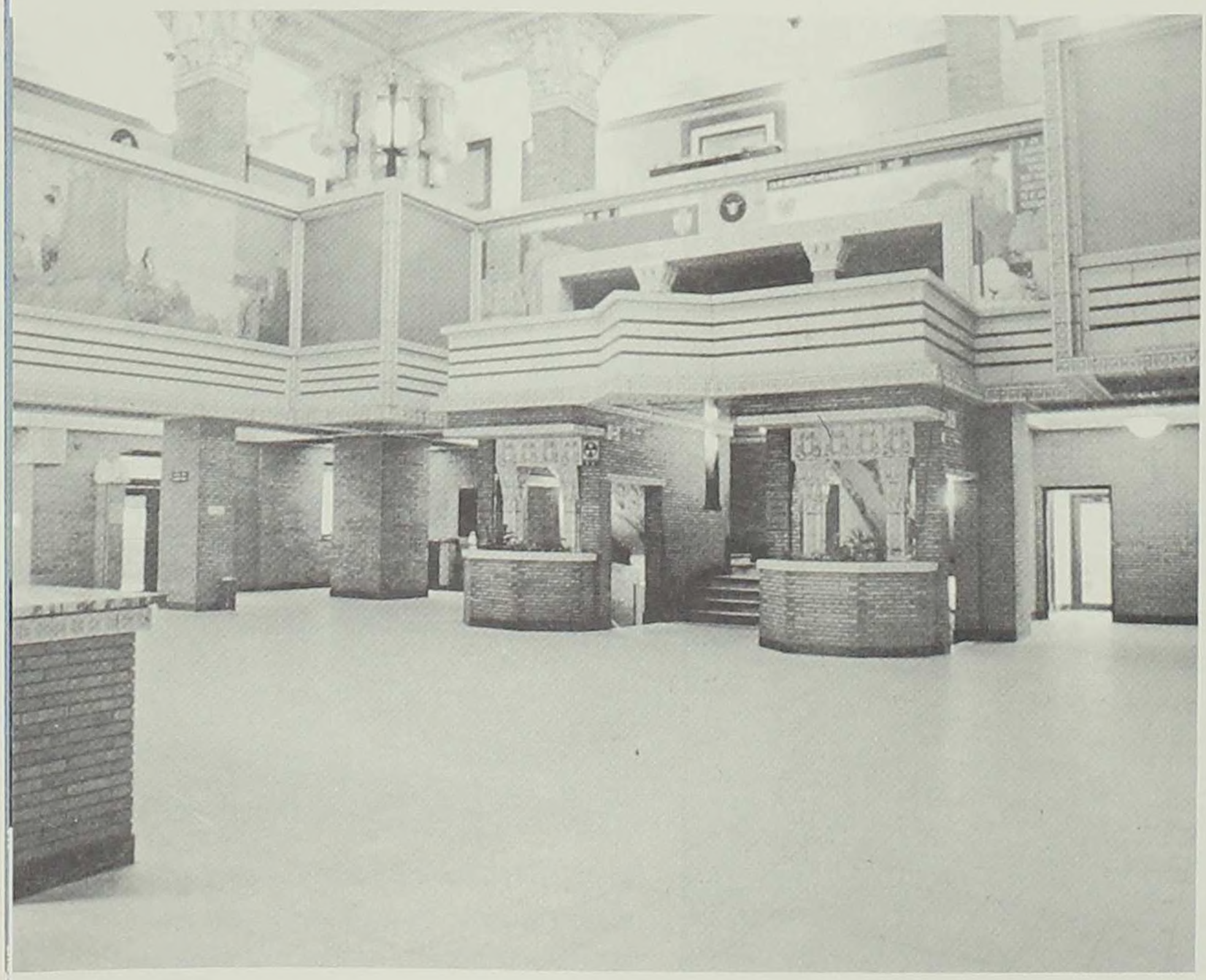
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Terra cotta ornament, glass mosaic inlays, tile floors, brick walls, vivid murals, all illuminated by light filtered through stained glass windows — the effect upon entering the courthouse rotunda can be staggering. Sixty-two years after the building's completion, the courthouse interior retains its original splendor. Perhaps the most arresting view is from the mezzanine, pictured on the top of the opposite page. The mural at the left, one of four commissioned from Chicago painter John W. Norton, depicts the cosmopolitan spirit of Sioux City at the turn of the century. Above, the quiet dignity of a large courtroom, handsomely appointed with fixtures chosen — and, in many cases, designed — by the architects.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR



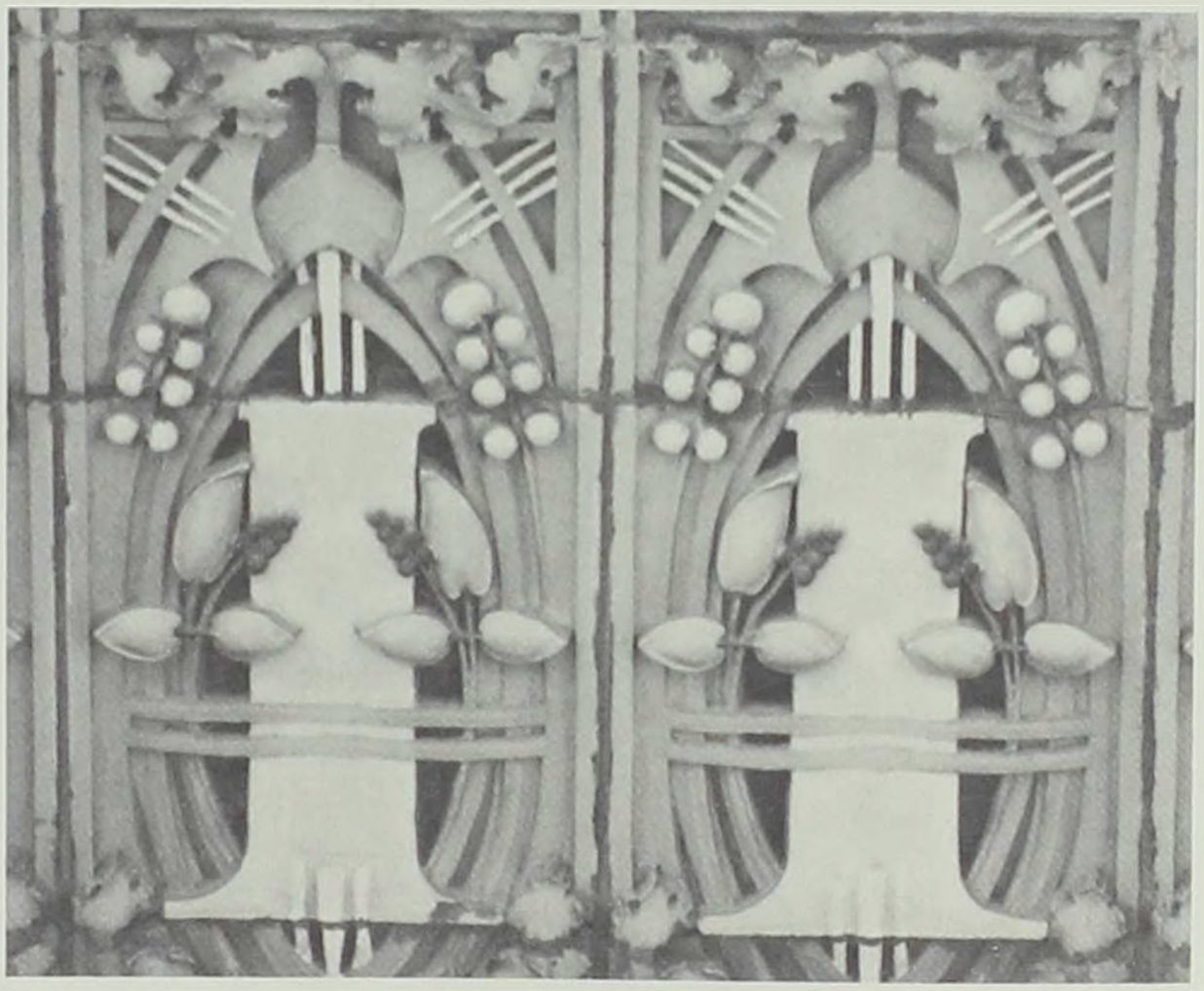
COURTESY THE AUTHOR

A spectacular dome of stained glass dominates the rotunda on the courthouse's main floor. The dome itself is contained within the office tower's first story, where it is surrounded by ventilating equipment and large windows that admit sunlight to illuminate the stained glass. George Elmslie designed the dome and rotunda, viewed from the main floor in the photograph to the left.

preliminary sketches to the Board. They showed a brick building rising above the street to a height of ten stories — the upper six contained in an elegant office tower, which rested on a massive sixty-foot high base housing courtrooms and the principal county offices.

Apparently the supervisors responded favorably, for Steele spent the next eight months refining his plan, meeting with county officials, and discussing the design with local citizens, among them an informal committee of businessmen advising the Board on the proposed courthouse. But as Steele, Elmslie, and Purcell readied their plan for the Board's final approval, committee members began to criticize the new design and asked the supervisors to reconsider their decision of March 23.

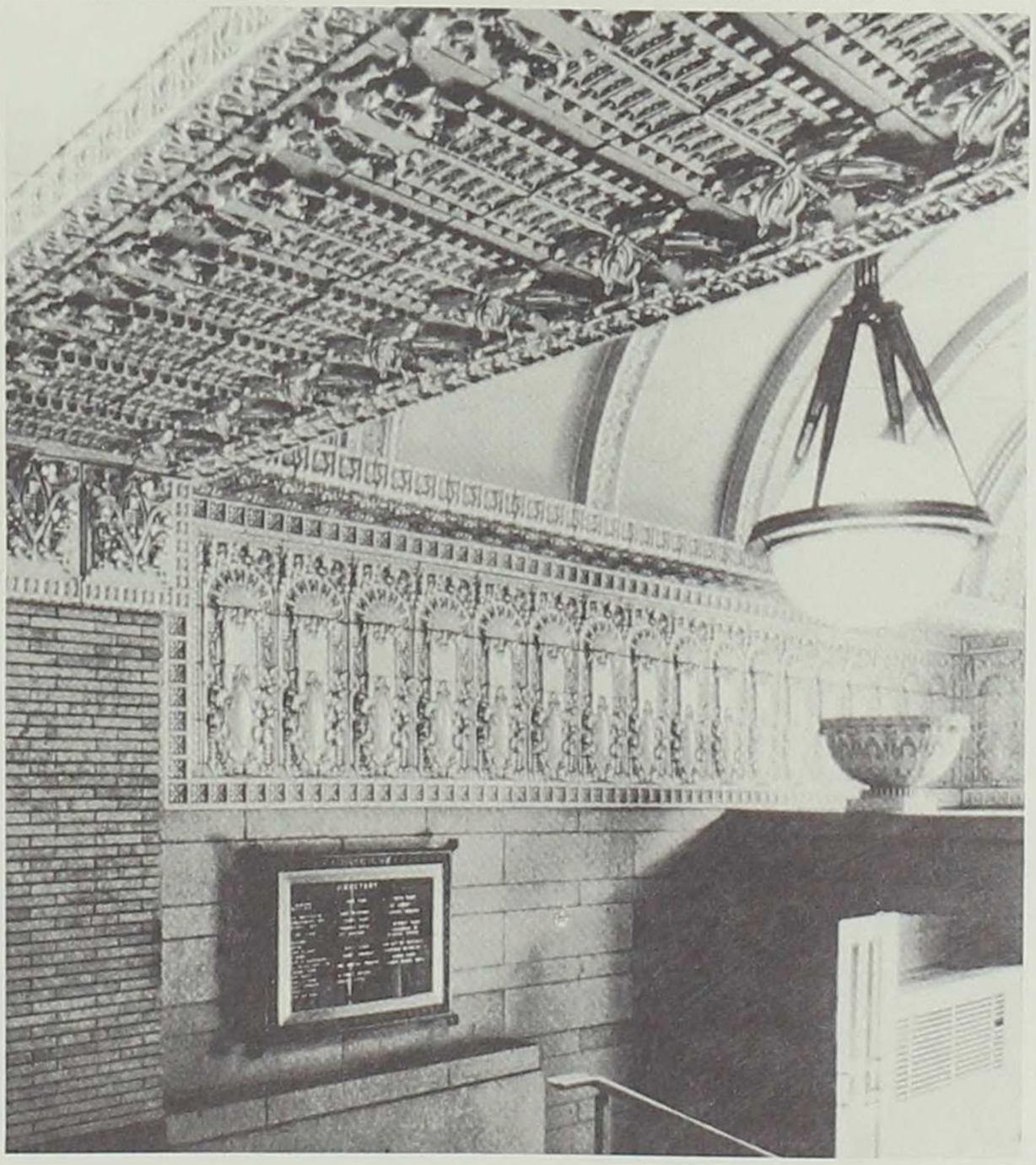
The businessmen saw several problems with Steele's plan, some practical and others aesthetic. First, they charged, the courthouse would be built on quicksand that would probably not support the structure. Even if it did, Steele's plans called for offices in a windowless basement — a prospect the businessmen found intolerable. "There is no apparent reason why important public business should be transacted in a hot, stuffy, dark, and dirty basement," declared one critic at a public meeting. The advisors also condemned the office tower as an "architectural experiment . . . unusual and extreme" — and unwanted by the citizens of Woodbury County, most of whom, the critics claimed, would prefer "a courthouse of ordinary and usual design." "Ordinary and usual" here

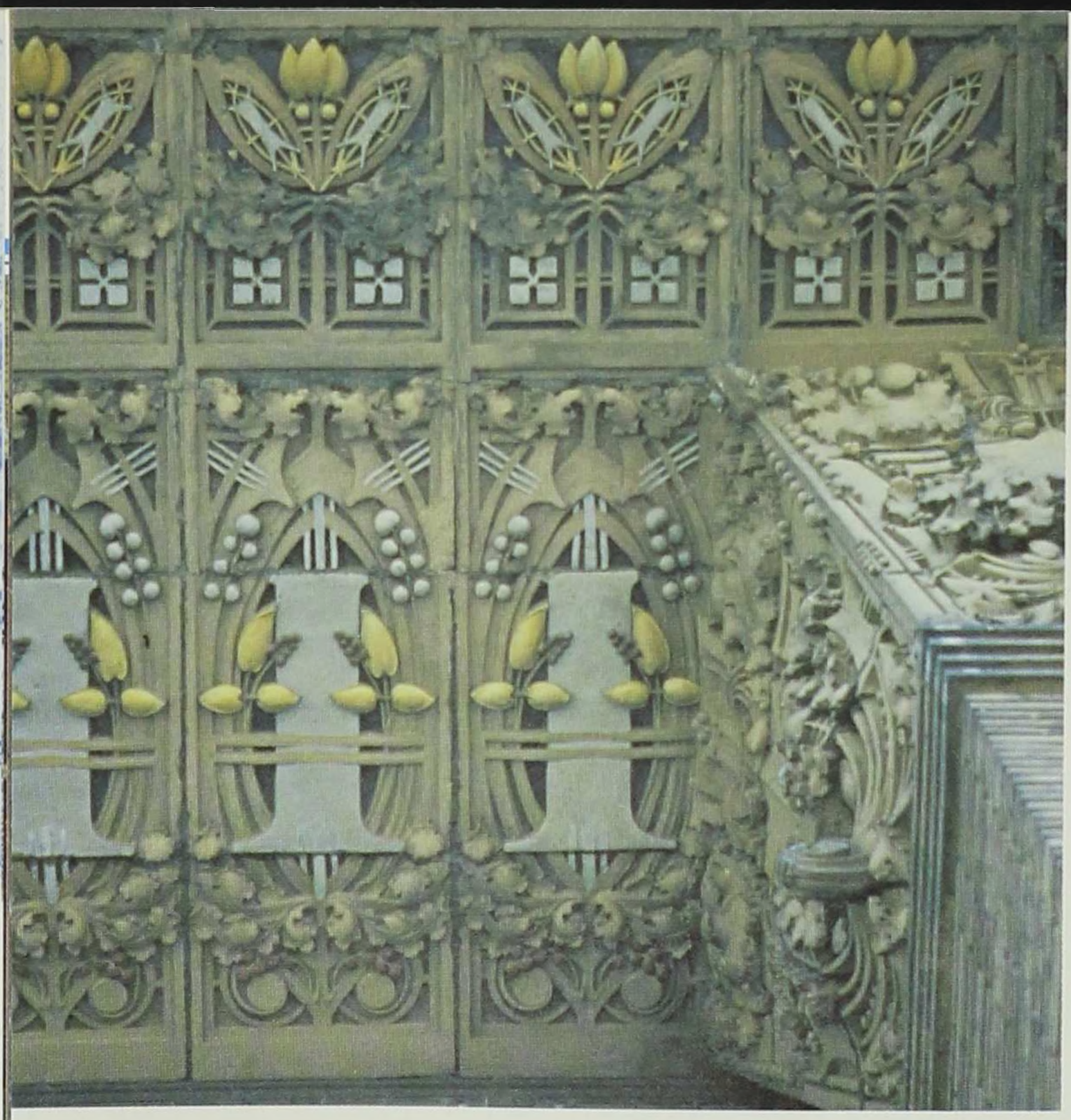


COURTESY THE AUTHOR

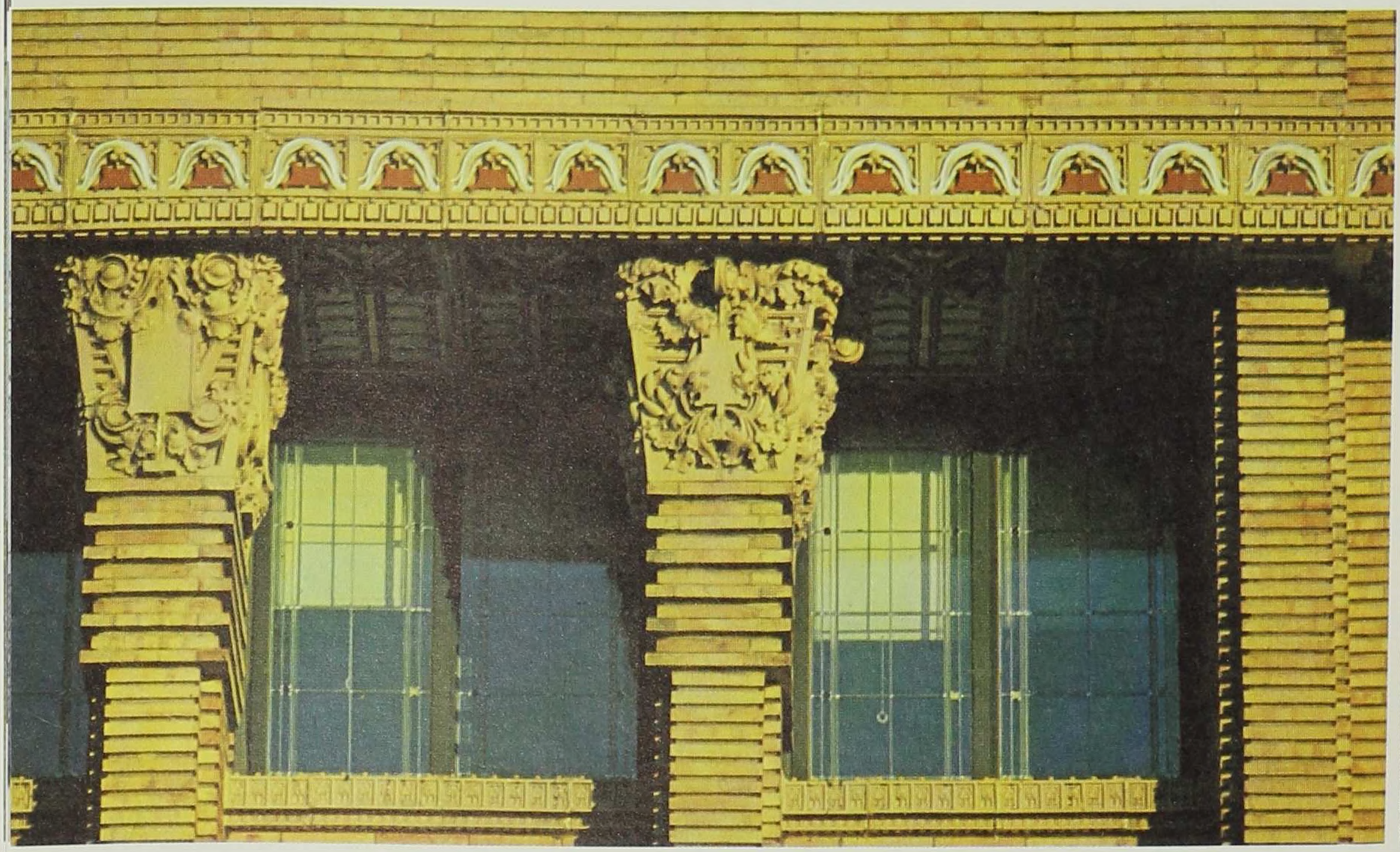
The courthouse's terra cotta ornament — a sample appears above — exhibits the strong influence of Louis Sullivan, as does the ornament's placement in the stairway at the Douglas Street entrance, pictured below.

COURTESY DIVISION OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION





Few twentieth-century buildings display the craftsmanship and artistic vision of William Steele's Woodbury County Courthouse. Thrusting westward from the building's office tower is sculptor Alfonso Iannelli's bold eagle (opposite top), a symbol of Sioux City's ambitious spirit. Iannelli also produced the sculpture atop the Douglas Street entrance (front cover). Here the authoritative presence of the LAW — "aged and slumbrous" — looms over the rush of traffic on the street below. To the left and below are details of ornament placed along windows and at the top of the courthouse's brick piers.



meant a towerless six-story structure built of familiar stone or granite, not brick.

The question of building material aroused other citizens, notably members of the Trades and Labor Assembly, whose representatives took issue with the businessmen's declarations. Responding to committee member E. A. Burgess' claim that taxpayers unanimously wanted no brick and no tower, E. J. O'Conner of the Assembly noted, "It is strange that none of the 3,000 union men of the city has expressed such an opinion." The laborers wanted brick rather than stone for a very practical reason: the Roman brick prescribed by Steele could be produced in Sioux City kilns by Sioux City workers. Indeed, the unions moved on several fronts to see that the courthouse project provided jobs for their members, including an effort to convince the supervisors that only local men should work on the building's construction.

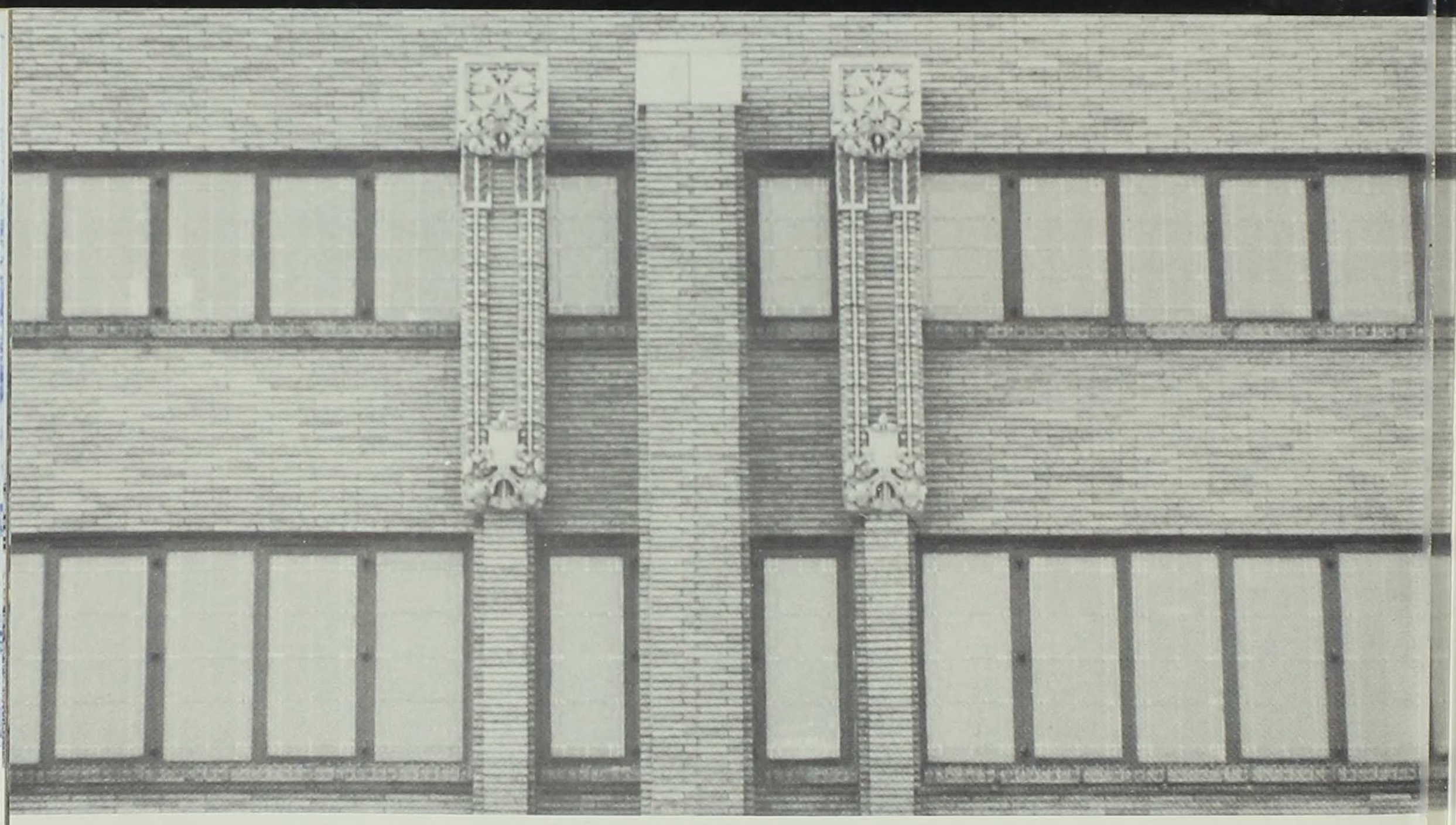
By early December 1915, public discussion of the proposed courthouse had grown rather heated, and with a good deal of relief the Board of Supervisors finally settled the matter on December 7. Having received word from the architect that the businessmen's complaints could not be answered without total revision of the design, the supervisors voted unanimously to adopt Steele's plan without alteration. On February 15, 1916, the Board awarded the construction contract to the Minneapolis firm of Splady, Albee, and Smith. Two years later — on March 1, 1918 — the building was completed.

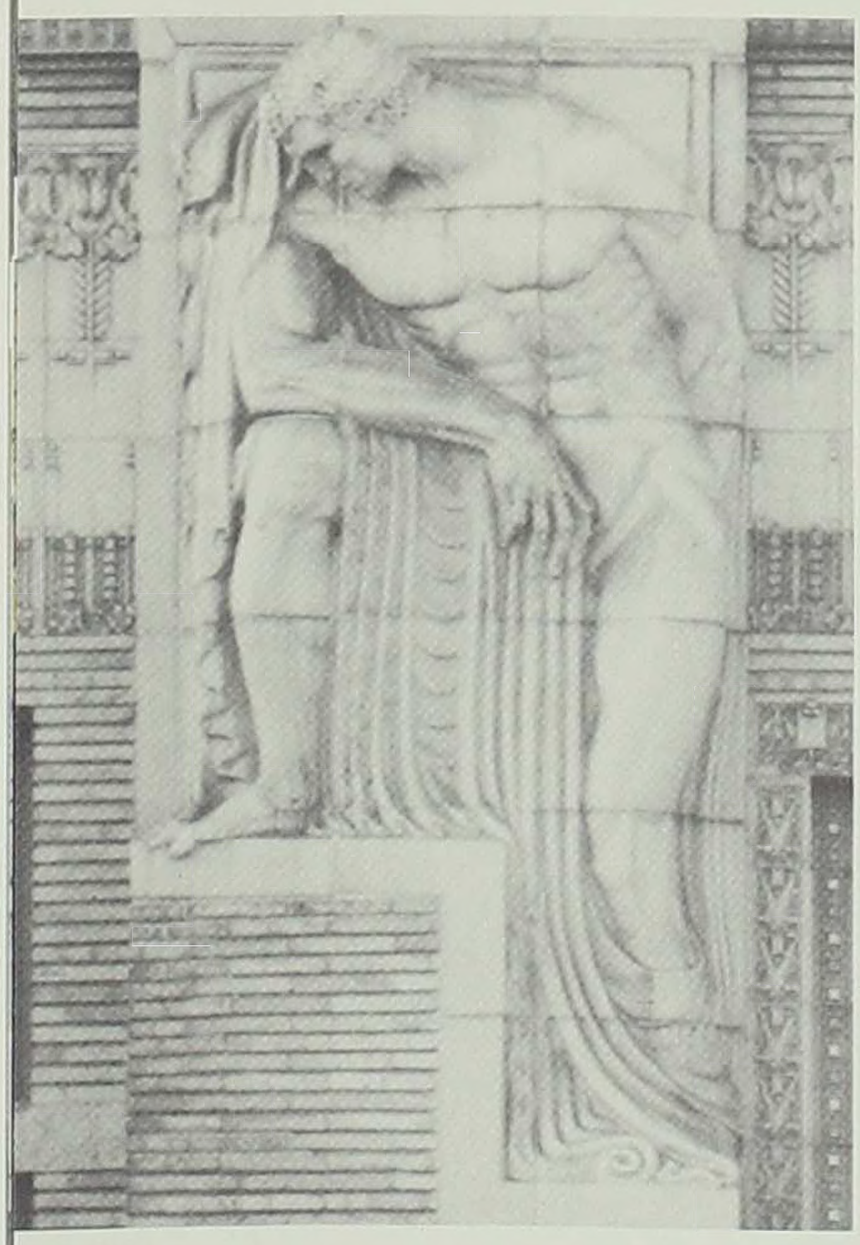
Praised by contemporaries, the Woodbury County Courthouse exhibited Prairie School principles in a

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

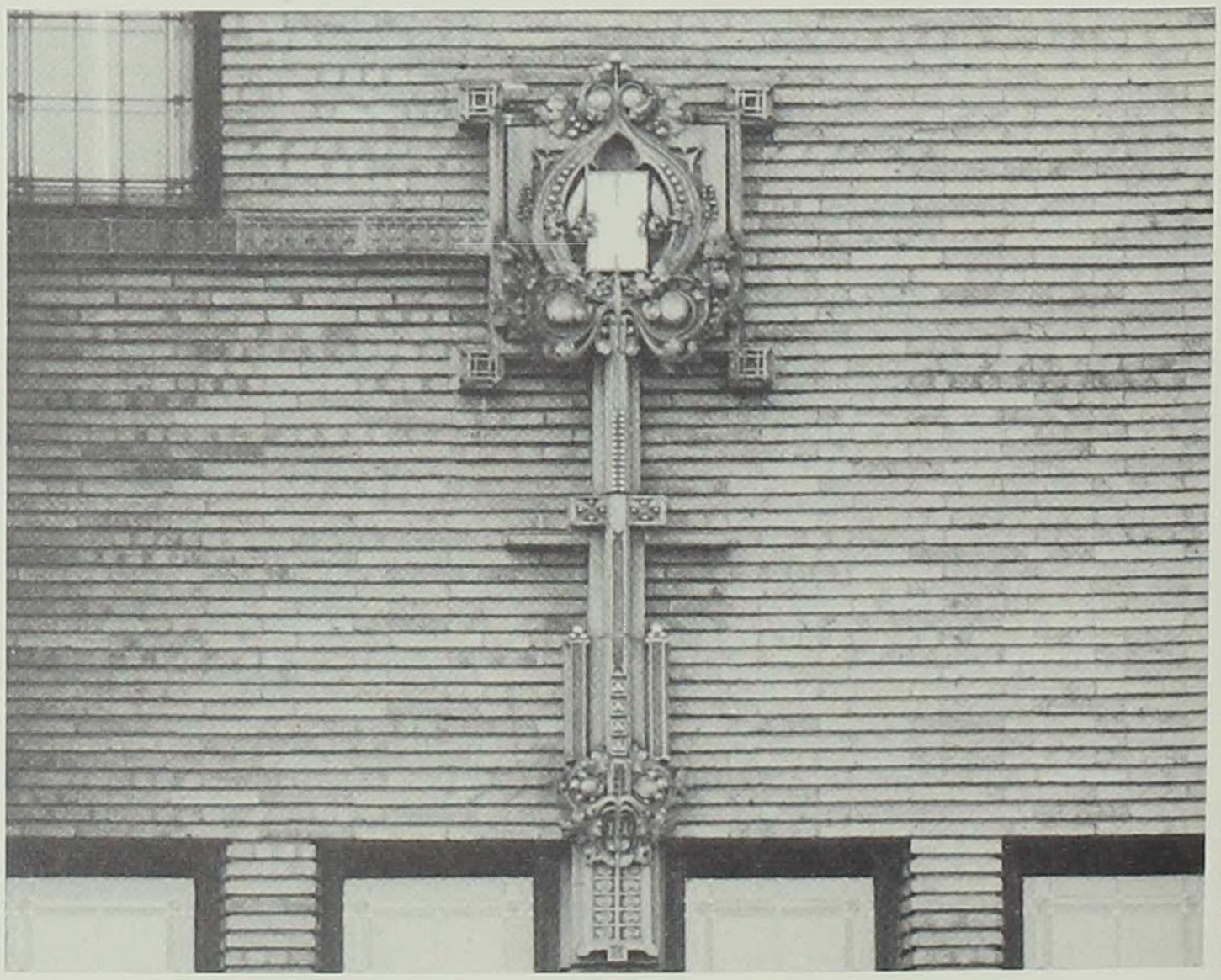
WE BEAT ON DRUMS AND DULL OUR EARS
TO SILENT MUSIC OF THE SPHERES. — WLS

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA





The windows pictured above and below suggest Louis Sullivan's influence on Steele and his associates. They bear a strong resemblance to the windows of the People's Bank building and St. Paul's Methodist Church, both in Cedar Rapids, which were designed by Sullivan in the early 1910s and featured in the March/April 1980 issue of The Palimpsest. *At left, part of Iannelli's sculpture at the north entrance.*



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

For their help in gathering information on the Woodbury County Courthouse, the editor wishes to thank Eugene Beam of Sioux City, Bruce Bienemann of the Sioux City Art Center, John Lawrence of Morningside College, Eugene Reich of Sioux City, Scott Sorensen of the Sioux City Public Museum, and Richard Guy Wilson of the University of Virginia.

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

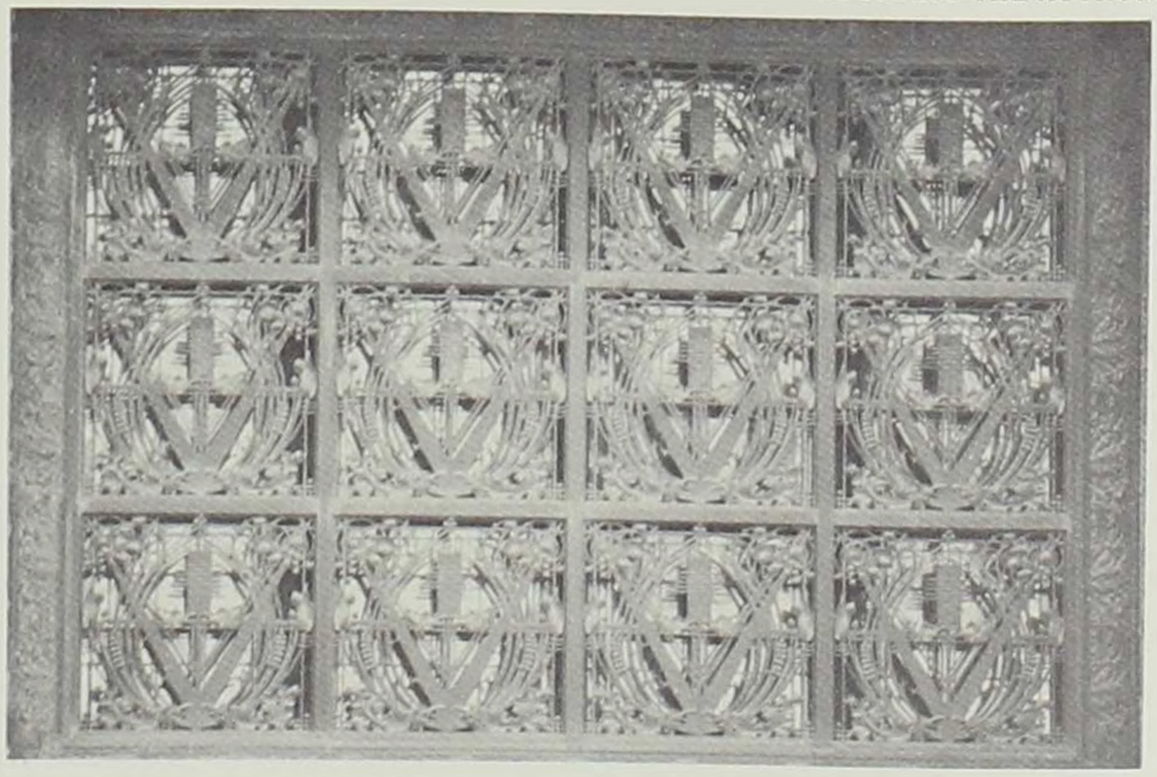
building of unusual scale. At the outset, Steele had divided the labor among his distinguished associates — Elmslie took major responsibility for the design, Purcell supervised the painting and sculpture, Paul D. Cook handled the structural engineering, and B. A. Broom directed the mechanical engineering. Skillful combination of modern structural methods with naturalistic decoration produced a building that proved Sullivan's point about American architecture not needing to lean on classical anachronisms to achieve dignity. Brick facades, bordered by granite at base and copings, enhanced by polychrome terra cotta, polished quartzite tile, stained glass and mosaic inlay, bronze doors and grilles — "unusual and extreme" as its critics charged, perhaps, but nonetheless a triumph of taste and planning. A half-century later, county employees work comfortably in space designed before World War I. Few buildings of comparable vintage can make such a claim. Needless to say, the courthouse has not sunk into quicksand.

Today another advisory board looks out for the building's welfare, helping county officials to adapt William Steele's masterpiece to modern office procedures when necessary. Although the architect left an extensive body of work in and around Sioux City before he moved to Omaha in the early 1930s, his reputation rests on the splendid Woodbury County Courthouse — a fitting tribute to his talent and to the exciting work of the Prairie School generation of which he was part. —*William Silag*

COURTESY SIOUX CITY PUBLIC MUSEUM

The courthouse, nearing completion in the winter of 1917-1918, viewed from the rear. The architect's original cost estimate fell within the $500,000 appropriated by Woodbury County's Board of Supervisors in 1914, but details — such as the bronze grille designed by Elmslie to complement Iannelli's sculpture at the north entrance (below) — helped push up the building's actual cost to about $850,000.

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



The Fenians in Iowa

by Phillip E. Myers

The emigration of millions of Irish to the United States in the 1840s, sparked by the notorious potato famine, followed several unsuccessful rebellions against the British absentee landlord system and the continued political oppression of Ireland. Many emigrants brought with them a deep love of their homeland and an intense hatred of the English, on whom they blamed all of Ireland's misfortunes. Living in the United States did not stop some Irishmen — never more, perhaps, than several thousand — from continuing the struggle for Irish independence from England. Indeed, in 1858 an Irish-American revolutionary organization was formed in New York. Members of the group called themselves the Fenians, after the Fianna warrior society that had fought oppressive landlords in the twelfth century. Most active in the 1860s, the Fenians believed that the best way to free Ireland from English domination was through terrorist activities intended to call attention to the plight of Ireland and eventually to bring about the disruption of the British Empire. One Fenian scheme called for the conquest of Canada as an advance post for the "reconquest of Ireland."

Because many Irishmen emigrated west to Iowa, particularly to Dubuque and Clinton counties, Iowa was by no means immune to Fenianism. In April 1866, a Fenian meeting was held in Des Moines where, it was said, "Ireland is pretty largely represented," and where the movement had "many ardent and working friends." Although information about support in Iowa for the "invasions" of Canada in 1866 and 1870 is scanty, historians have uncovered evidence of a small, futile expedition across the border from Minnesota in 1871. These incursions proved, perhaps inevitably, to be failures, and frustrated Fenian militia turned increasingly to terrorist tactics, such as the burning of harvested hay and grain. As a consequence, many less extreme agitators split away from the organization headquartered in New York.

Whether or not these Fenian schemes for the invasion of Canada were widely supported in Iowa, the political life of the Irish in the Hawkeye State does bear further investigation. Iowa newspapers with many Irish subscribers disparaged Britain continually in the years after the Civil War, making use of Union resentment of England to press the Irish cause. The *Iowa State Register* of Des Moines contended that "the British Lion has a lively and extensive tail, but there is an excellent prospect of having it pulled out by the roots before the Fenian excitement shall have dropped dead." The *Register* elsewhere

announced a rally, led by F. F. Barrett and Dr. C. C. McGovern, using the motto, "Fenians and the Freedom of Ireland." Speeches at the rally illustrated that Irish republican agitators in Iowa considered their American freedoms to be dependent upon freedom for Ireland. The *Register* and other newspapers in the state, in fact, fully supported Fenian attempts to conquer Canada: "If Britannia rules the waves, [the] Fenians are in a fair way to rule Canada. Success to 'em." Iowa journals called upon the federal government to keep its hands off the Fenians during their attempts upon Canada, a plea that went unheeded in Washington.

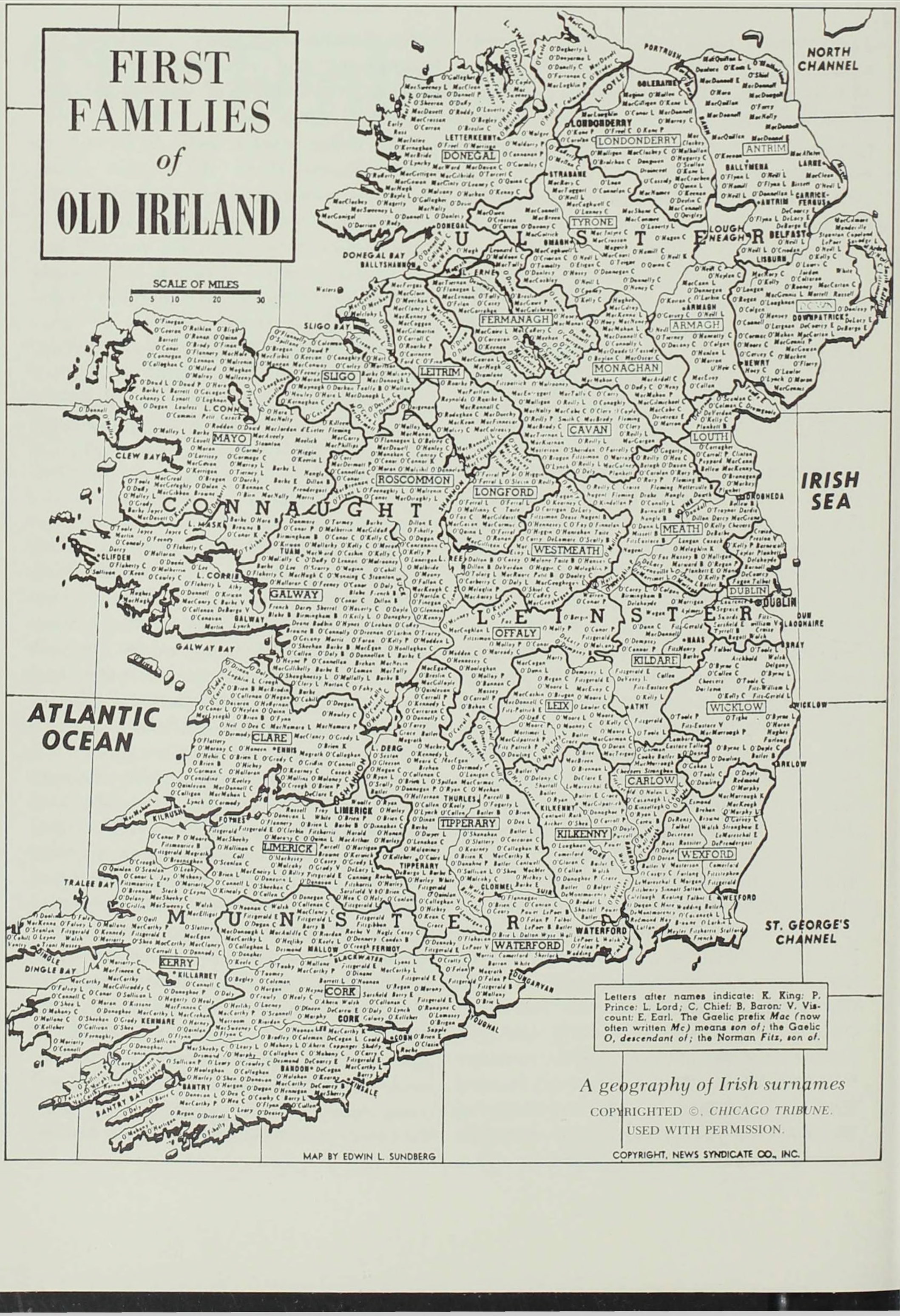
The failure of the first raid on Canada in the spring of 1866 did not markedly dampen the spread of Fenianism in the Hawkeye State. Republicans meeting in Norwalk demanded the release of the Fenians taken prisoner after the abortive raid. Muscatine hosted Dr. Bell, a Fenian from Dublin, and Davenport had what was termed a "tremendous meeting." Large Fenian demonstrations were held in Dubuque on July 4th, where 15 percent of the population was Irish. In 1867, Fenians from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota convened in Des Moines, where they held a Grand Fenian Ball on August 1. The Sarsfield Circle of Fenians held four annual balls between 1867 and 1870 in Dubuque, which had become a national center of Fenianism. In 1868, delegates of the Fenian Brotherhood met in Iowa City and heard speeches by General John O'Neill, the Brotherhood's president. Voiced at these meetings was a growing desire to mount another raid on Canada. A notice based on O'Neill's speeches announced that "an organizer . . . will soon visit your localities. Be prepared to labor with him in the glorious work and . . . the shout of a triumphant and victorious people will gladden the heart of the republican world."

Still, other Iowans seem to have been unenthusiastic about the Fenian cause, and the revolutionary euphoria that gripped the Irish imagination dimmed in Iowa as elsewhere after a few years. When the Fenian-planned invasions of Canada went awry, the organization came to appear ridiculous. It did not follow, however, that Irish-American hatred of England diminished in any way. Hopes for Irish freedom were publicly resurrected in Iowa in the 1880s, and the cause of Irish freedom attracted some of the public attention it had in the 1860s.

On October 30, 1878, Fenian leader Michael Davitt spoke at Globe Hall in Dubuque, appealing for active aid for Ireland and rousing considerable sympathy. Davitt was the vanguard for the visit in 1880 of the Irish nationalist leader and member of the British Parliament, Charles Stewart Parnell. For weeks before Parnell's arrival, Iowa communities organized themselves to demonstrate public support for the destitute of Ireland. The cold, stubborn parliamentary radical was able to collect thousands of dollars from Iowans, visit the State House, and address the national legislature — courtesies usually reserved for visiting heads of foreign governments. Parnell's visit rekindled suspicions — in London and in the Canadian capital, Ottawa — of a Fenian resurgence.

In his speeches, Parnell addressed the glaring inequities of British rule in Ireland. He argued that the fertile Irish soil could easily support a population twice the size of that which then existed. He bit-

FIRST FAMILIES of OLD IRELAND



Letters after names indicate: K. King; P. Prince; L. Lord; C. Chief; B. Baron; V. Viscount; E. Earl. The Gaelic prefix *Mac* (now often written *Mc*) means *son of*; the Gaelic *O*, *descendant of*; the Norman *Fitz*, *son of*.

A geography of Irish surnames

MAP BY EDWIN L. SUNDBERG

terly complained that the landlord system permitted "a famine of money, not food," and argued that impoverished peasants in Ireland could not afford to buy the ample foodstuffs being sent across the Irish Sea to the voracious English markets. Like many protesters, Parnell attributed the source of Ireland's problems to the British absentee landlord system. Moreover, he criticized the British relief agencies — especially the Dublin Mansion House and the Duchess of Marlborough funds — for ignoring the root cause of the recurrent famines — again, the landlord system. Parnell urged Americans to boycott these agencies, as they forced the oppressed to accept charity from their oppressors, the landlords who dominated the British relief committees.

Parnell inspired a host of relief efforts for Ireland and engendered a strong resurgence of Irish-American nationalism. In Des Moines, Dubuque, Sioux City, and other Iowa cities with large Irish populations, fund-raising activities were organized to aid the Irish Land League — an organization dedicated to the reform of the land laws governing Ireland, including the abolition of tithes and absentee landlordism. Impatience with the vacillation of England's Liberal Prime Minister, William Gladstone, grew into support for Parnell, and for a short time in 1881 Gladstone worried that radical agitation would jeopardize his tenuous alliance with the conservatives of his party, whose support he needed to accomplish any reforms in Ireland.

The radical organization of Fenians was little concerned with the need for compromise and political expediency. In 1880, memories of past terrorism were revived when the Clan-na-Gael, the secret wing of the Fenians, began to plan another invasion of Canada. Sir John Macdonald, Prime Minister of Canada, worried that if Parnell were convicted in England on the charges of conspiracy and disruption of Parliament he then faced, "one hundred thousand Fenians will land in Canada in twenty-four hours." In January 1881, Macdonald's anxiety seemed to be confirmed when he received an anonymous letter from Webster City, Iowa warning of plans for another invasion. Macdonald took these warnings seriously, expressing the belief that "these demons [the Fenians] will stop at no atrocity and I don't think that any risk should be run." He also feared that the Fenians would attempt to kidnap visiting members of the British royal family. Events in England and Ireland, such as the murder of two English politicians in Phoenix Park, Dublin, raised the pitch of everyone's fears, including Macdonald's.

The warning from Webster City seemed credible — and ominous — in light of these events. Although Fenians were thought to be active wherever British imperial forces were stationed — as in coastal cities like Seattle and New York — areas of the Midwest came under suspicion as well. By 1883, Macdonald feared that customarily peaceful, non-Fenian Irish immigrants were being moved to even greater hatred of England, and that Fenian sentiments were on the rise in the Upper Midwest. In the spring of 1884, local branches of Parnell's nationalist Land League met in Sioux City, Fort Dodge, Clinton, and elsewhere to hear excited debates on the question of Ireland. These communities were fully informed of the bombings and new conspiracies in England and France. Editorials in the Fort Dodge *Times* and the Dubuque *Herald*

An Irish rent war, as depicted in the Illustrated London News, *January 29, 1887 (SHSI)*

reported that the Canadian government, frightened by Fenian scares since January, had adopted tighter security measures along the border between the United States and Canada. As in the 1860s, the Canadians requested that the United States increase its vigilance along the border.

The American consul in Winnipeg requested that the Canadians allow American troops to pursue Fenians into Manitoba in the event of another raid. Lord Lansdowne, the new Governor-General of Canada, expressed some interest in the idea, but rejected it because he did not think Manitobans were sympathetic to terrorism. He felt that the Northwest Mounted Police, a small, efficient force scattered along the border, could handle the raiders, as could the Winnipeg police, which had recruited additional deputies. Lansdowne, confident of American border vigilance and aware of the earlier ineptitude of the Fenians, feared to set a precedent of allowing the United States Army to cross the frontier after Indians and desperadoes.

But the Fenians were certainly talking tough. A letter from the "Voice of an O'Dempsey in Iowa," postmarked "Clermont, Iowa, January 1882," was sent to the *United Irishman*, a popular Fenian newspaper:

> *I believe in the dynamite policy, and am in for a fight, believing that by these means alone can Ireland ever gain her independence. Blow up — burn — shoot — poison — anything to get rid of the infernal, blood-thirsty, famine-making tyrants, who, after robbing and plundering Ireland for seven centuries, after having committed all undesirable kinds of barbarity upon the Irish people, after driving them into exile, and who, when the Irish had flocked under the protecting wings of their Republic, sent their hireling emissary scoundrels to destroy our reputation, as they sent their "Alabama's" [a British-built Confederate cruiser] to destroy our commerce.*

Letters such as this convinced Lord Derby, the British colonial secretary, of the need for action. On March 29, 1884, he asked Lansdowne for an official report of the rural unrest in Manitoba, which he thought the Fenians might attempt to exploit. A month later, the British proconsul responded that searches for conspirators were underway in Winnipeg. Lansdowne remained optimistic, however. He wrote, "I have heard very little about Fenian doings lately, except that the organization has plenty of money and is active." The United States government lived up to Lansdowne's expectations, cooperating with the Canadians to keep the Fenian organizations under surveillance. A surveillance circular was issued through the U.S. Attorney General's office alerting United States attorneys and marshalls to the threat of Fenian agitation. The circular suggested that "the honor of the nation instructs [officials] to be diligent in their efforts to prevent the offenses and prosecute the offenders."

On March 23, 1884, the British called the attention of the American government to reports of preparations in Iowa and Minnesota for an armed invasion of Manitoba. The British conceded the circumstantial nature of the evidence concerning these military preparations, but emphasized the fact that Lansdowne felt the rumors important enough to ask Washington to watch the borders and to discover what the Department of State proposed to do "in order to prevent the [Fenian] movement from assuming dangerous proportions."

A number of Iowans were important subjects of this surveillance. Suspicion of Fenian activity in Iowa is shown in the diplomatic correspondence of April 1884. Early that month, British government officials began to suspect John Brennan of Sioux City, M. C. Gannon of Dubuque, and C. N. McCarthy of St. Paul, Minnesota of Fenian activities. Because of their outspoken support for the Irish cause, the British requested that the American government look into the backgrounds and activities of these men. Shortly thereafter, Morris D. O'Connell, the federal district attorney at Fort Dodge, was instructed to investigate Brennan and Gannon. O'Connell was a good choice to head this investigation, since he often travelled across northern Iowa on legal business. O'Connell knew Brennan personally, but rather than speak to him directly he discussed Brennan with Sioux City's federal marshall, who spoke well of the suspect. O'Connell wrote his superiors in Des Moines that he had inadvertently met Brennan riding with a judge, and that Brennan "did not appear like a warrior or conspirator." Still, the Fort Dodge district attorney arranged to have a marshall monitor Brennan's movements and keep him fully informed.

An eviction in County Kerry, from the Illustrated London News, *January 29, 1887 (SHSI)*

O'Connell's analysis was accurate, for Brennan was an orator, not a soldier. Extremely popular in Sioux City, he was considered by many to be among Iowa's leading citizens. Born in County Roscommon in 1845, the penniless Brennan emigrated to the United States in 1865, and then worked as a laborer while attending night school to get a law degree. In 1869, when hearing difficulties curtailed his law career, Brennan worked as a reporter for the Sioux City *Daily Times* for five years, served as a justice of the peace for six years, served briefly as city councilman, and later worked as city attorney.

Describing himself as "a full-blooded Celtic Irishman, of Catholic stock," Brennan declared himself more democratic and critical of the government of England than "the average, native-born American." As a campaign orator, Brennan supported the virulently Anglophobic James G. Blaine for President. Later, he abandoned the Democratic party because of its support for the free trade issue and supported strong Republican protectionism — an anti-British position. He also became associated with Irish nationalist leaders in Irish meetings throughout the

An Irish priest blesses parishioners bound for the New World, from the Illustrated London News, *May 10, 1851 (SHSI)*

United States. Knowledge of Brennan's varied activities, no matter how suggestive, enabled O'Connell to conclude that Brennan was not in a Fenian ring. He wrote to his superior in the surveillance organization:

> *I am astonished to be notified by you that the Canadian Government has become alarmed, but recognizing the fact that such movements are sometimes very secret and noting your positive instructions, [I] will start for Dubuque today [April 21] to find out whether anything is being done there to build up such an enterprise, or to foster it.*

In Dubuque, O'Connell had trouble locating Gannon, a member of the national council of Clan-na-Gael and the local Irish Freedom League. He had heard of W. F. Gannon, a commercial salesman for a wholesale grocery house, and found that this Gannon was in sympathy with Parnell — but, of course, so were many others who had never dreamed of organizing and taking up the cudgels against the British Empire.

The other Gannon that O'Connell investigated, incorrectly believed by the State Department to reside in Dubuque, was M. V. Gannon of Davenport, another community leader who sympathized with the democratic aspirations of the Irish. Gannon had probably been a member of the terrorist Clan-na-Gael when Parnell visited Iowa in early 1880. According to the Davenport *Sunday Democrat*, Gannon reviewed the week's activities in Ireland in front of a gathering of the Irish National League on March 9, 1884. This had been a time when rumors of rebellion in Manitoba and a Fenian invasion were "thick in the air." But O'Connell proved unable to find more concrete evidence to connect either of the two Gannons with the Fenians.

Thus, O'Connell found no real radical activity in Sioux City, Dubuque, Davenport, or elsewhere, despite a very "warm feeling toward Mr. Parnell among the citizens of Dubuque[,] native Americans as well as Irishmen." O'Connell found no trace of Fenian activity in Clinton either, where he consulted with another "discreet friend." In his letter to the Secretary of State, O'Connell wrote:

> *Since receiving your letter I have directed my entire time to investigating this matter, and have travelled nearly 700 miles but find nothing. I will continue to be vigilant in this matter, and will keep you advised if I find anything to communicate, but will not visit any other parts of my district unless you direct me to do so. If you wish me to visit Clinton, Cedar Rapids, McGregor, or any other points . . . I will do so promptly. I would do so without instructions . . . only I do not feel it is necessary, and do not care to invest more time and money in this than is fairly warranted.*

Buren R. Sherman, Governor of Iowa, underlined the sentiments expressed by O'Connell. In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Frederick Frelinghuysen on April 26,

Sherman expressed his surprise that he had received the inquiry; he knew of no Fenian activity in Iowa, no arms collected or men drilled for any such purpose. Sherman was not totally accurate. There were some ardent Fenian sympathizers in central Iowa, within twenty miles of where Sherman wrote and outside of O'Connell's area of responsibility. Indeed, on Friday, April 4, 1884, at the height of the Fenian "scare," the Fort Dodge *Times* published a letter from Colfax. The letter was about Patrick Ford, the Fenian chieftain who edited the *Irish World*, a revolutionary journal published in New York City. The Colfax resident was overjoyed that Ford had abandoned techniques of passive resistance for violence. He wrote:

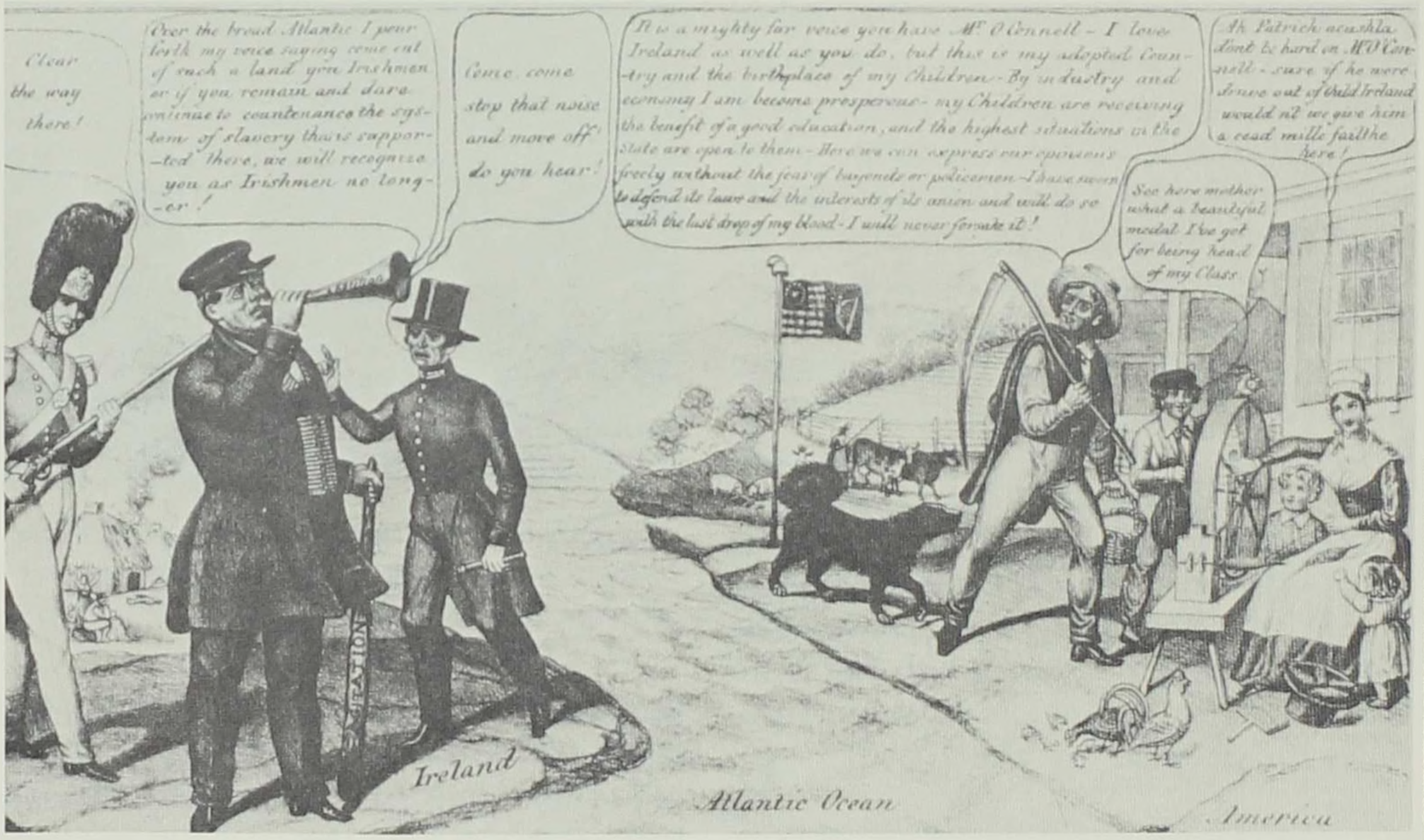
> *What is all hell except assassination? . . . What are [British] soldiers and police in Ireland but assassins? As for cruel[,] cowardly and barbarous, the English have never been anything else. . . . Yes, the English government is barbarous, when it tried to divide the United States by sending or allowing [Confederate] cruisers to capture or burn [Federal] ships and prolong the [Civil] War.*

No evidence exists that the suspects in northern Iowa were aware of being watched. O'Connell's level-headedness prevented him from transforming his investigation into a witch hunt. He refused to fall victim to the delusions of a grand Fenian conspiracy that dominated the thinking of some of the higher officials involved in the matter. O'Connell's instructions from the Attorney General of Iowa enabled him to assume the innocence of those under investigation. The district attorney avoided the temptation to search for or fabricate shocking disclosures, and performed his research with admirable

Emigrants about to set sail from Ireland to America, from the Illustrated London News, *May 10, 1851 (SHSI)*

sensitivity. His personal sympathies for Irish nationalism are not documented. He must have known of the humanitarian outlook of the Fort Dodge Land League, but his quick action implies that he was angered by the recent wave of terrorism. O'Connell was an established figure in northwest Iowa, and not a man likely to condone the use of brutal and inhumane tactics to bring about the freedom of Ireland. His impartiality enabled him to act as an official investigator and unofficial arbitrator, and his views on both counts were accepted — readily, it seems — by higher authorities.

Though Iowa's interest in Fenianism was fading, there were fears of another Fenian uprising in the spring of 1885. Lansdowne encouraged the Department of State to investigate. The State Department again promised assistance and again the rumors were found to lack credibility. No search was made in the Upper Midwest for covert Fenian activists this time. Nevertheless, the spector of Fenianism haunted the British government throughout the nineteenth century. It continued to sour Anglo-



(COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

"O'Connell's Call and Pat's Reply, 1843"

American relations to the end of the century, when a growing rapprochement came to overshadow the Fenian chimera that had for so long poisoned the ties between the two countries.

Until then, the strong cultural sentiment in Iowa for Irish freedom kept the illusion of Fenianism alive. In 1886, Patrick Ford ardently requested support from Governor William Larrabee of Clermont. In a private letter to Larrabee, Ford characterized Parnell as

> *the chosen mouthpiece of the Irish demand [for independence] . . . "Ireland a Nation" is the demand of Parnell. "Ireland a Nation!" is the worldwide cheer of the Irish race. In that sentiment we believe you share; and, so believing, we ask you, as a lover of liberty, to join us in the acclaim of Justice for Ireland.*

Ford asked Larrabee to write to the *Irish World*. Although Larrabee was moved, he kept the letter and probably did not respond. But the Governor had absorbed the feelings of Irish sympathizers in Iowa, for he scribbled on the back of Ford's plea: "Home rule for Ireland has ever been the prayer of the American people and I rejoice that it seems likely to be now accomplished. The cause is just and should prevail." Such sentiments kept the cause of Irish freedom alive until it was finally attained in 1921, after the spilling of much blood in a civil war that tore the island nation apart. Even now, Northern Ireland is still reeling under the intense racial and religious animosities that provided the well-spring of the Fenian movement in America during the 1860s and 1880s. □

Note on Sources

Information for this article was found in the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa; the National Archives, Washington, D.C.; and the Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines. The private papers of Gladstone, Granville, and Derby — located in London and Liverpool — were also consulted.

CONTRIBUTORS

WAYNE A. DEJOHN earned a Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin. He teaches at St. Ambrose College in Davenport.

Architectural photographer GERALD MANSHEIM lives on a farm near West Branch. A long-time student of Prairie School architecture, last year he prepared a picture essay on the Iowa buildings of Louis Sullivan for *The Palimpsest*. He is now touring the state with a series of lecture-slide shows on Iowa's architectural heritage, sponsored by the Iowa Humanities Board and the Division of Historic Preservation.

PHILLIP E. MYERS received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa, and is Assistant Professor of Modern History at Mankato State University in Minnesota. He is completing a manuscript about the ideas of British foreign-policy makers and their diplomats in the nineteenth century, with emphasis on Anglo-American relations. Myers grew up on a family farm near Ottumwa, Iowa.

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